

THE STREET PHOTOGRAPHY COMPOSITION MANUAL

BY ERIC KIM

INTRODUCTION TO COMPOSITION IN STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

“Geometry is the language of man... he has discovered rhythms, rhythms apparent to the eye and clear in the relations with one another. And these rhythms are at the very root of human activities. They resound in man by an organic inevitability, the same fine inevitability which causes the tracing out of the Golden Section by children, old men, savages, and the learned.”

- Le Corbusier (1931, Towards A New Architecture)

Ever since I started photography, I have been fascinated with composition, forms, geometry, lines, and shapes. Even though most people associate me with street photography, I had my humble beginnings in architecture, landscape, and abstract photography.

I remember the first time I discovered the “rule of thirds” as a compositional tool in photography, and how that changed my mind and opened up my world. On my first Canon SD 600, I would apply the “rule of thirds” grid on the back of my camera and experimented with diagonal compositions, following the rule of thirds, and placing my subject in different sides of the frame.

As time went on, I found that landscape, architecture, macro, and other forms of photography started to bore me. Sure, I could make “pretty photos” with nice compositions, but the photos didn’t feel like they had any soul, purpose, or life.

I then discovered street photography, in which I could capture emotion, intensity, and the rawness of everyday life. I started to apply my lessons in composition from architecture and landscape photography to my work.

The first biggest breakthrough in my photography was the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson. When I saw his timeless black and white images (both well-composed and timed) I knew what kinds of images I wanted to shoot.

I followed shooting like Henri Cartier-Bresson; framing a scene the way I wanted to, and patiently awaiting for my subject to step into the right part of the frame, before I would capture “the decisive moment.”

After about 3-4 years of shooting this way, it started to bore me. I no longer felt excitement from shooting this way.



Seoul, 2009



THE “FISHING TECHNIQUE”

Early on in my street photography, I would be like a fisher. For example in this image, I finished work after a late night at work. I saw this interesting sculpture figure and saw an arrow pointing straight to an empty spot. I thought to myself: “How perfect it would be if I could get someone to walk to that spot!”

I waited patiently for about 15 minutes for this photograph. It was late at night, so not many people were walking around. However from the corner of my eye, I saw a bicyclist riding into my shot. Excited, I held up my camera, ready to take the photograph at the “decisive moment” when all the elements would come together.

Lots of cars were coming into the shot and out of the shot, so I was nervous I wouldn’t be able to make the photograph in time. But fortunately the second the bicyclist hit the “X” mark, I got the image I wanted.

For the “**fishing technique**,” you need patience. You need to pre-frame and pre-compose the shot, and simply wait for the right subject to enter the frame at the right moment. Look for leading lines, geometric elements, and figures that fit the scene.

Santa Monica, 2010

So what exactly started to bore me with shooting with the “fishing technique”? Well, I don’t consider myself a very patient person. I don’t like sitting and waiting. I actually prefer to interact with strangers, to get close, and intimate. However when I started shooting street photography, I had the wrong idea that all street photographers *had* to shoot like Henri Cartier-Bresson: unobtrusive, candid, and focus primarily on composition, geometry, lines, shapes, and forms. I wanted to be more active with my street photography.

I think the below photograph is a good example that shows combining the “fishing technique” with a more active approach. The background story: I was going up an escalator (during a lunch break). I saw the leading lines of the escalators (on the left and right of the frame), and thought it might be interesting to have someone step in the center. I was lucky that I caught a man walking on by at the right moment, and I also captured his legs in a perfect “V” shape. The “V” shape of his legs is two diagonal lines, and also can form a triangle composition as well. What is the “cherry on top” (small detail that makes a photograph great)? To me, it is the two reflections of the men on the left and right.



LEADING LINES

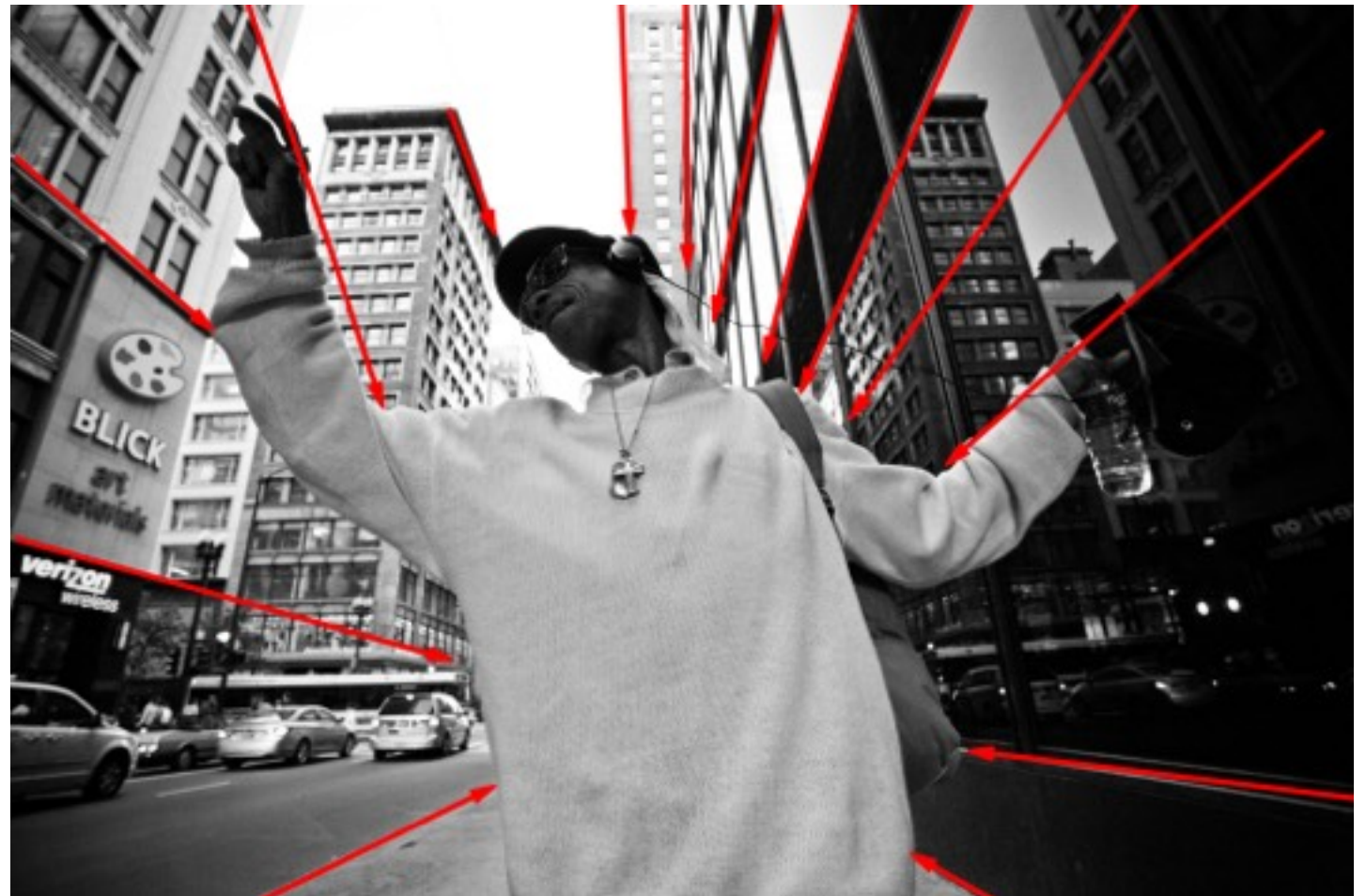
After I started to get bored to shoot with the “fishing technique,” I went on YouTube and searched for some inspiration on other street photographers. I came across the work and approach of Bruce Gilden who absolutely blew me away. He would shoot at very close proximities (about an arm-length away), while shooting with a flash on a 28mm lens.

A lot of people called him an asshole, but I personally found his work to be inspirational. I loved how raw, intense, and intimate his images were. Not only that, but his photos were also well composed.

I then thought to myself, how could I create similar images? I wanted photos that had more energy, passion, and life, but I also wanted photographs that were well-composed.

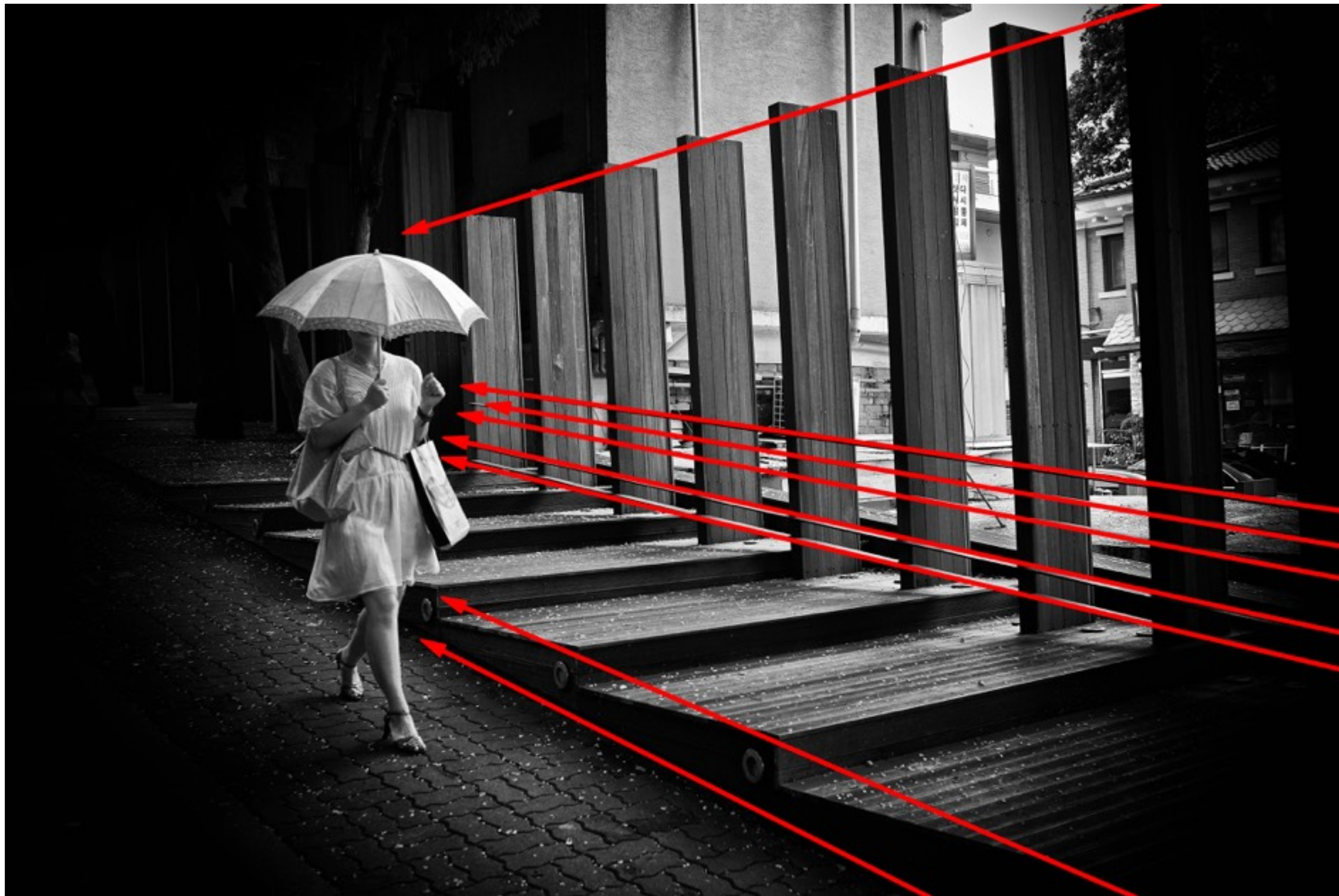
One compositional technique I found helpful was utilizing “**leading lines**” when shooting up-close and personal. In this photograph in Chicago, I saw this guy dancing in the streets. I got really close with a 17mm.

I crouched down really low, and tried to have his body positioned in the center of the frame, with all of the leading lines pointing straight to his body. What I also think makes the shot more dynamic is how his arms are also positioned along the leading lines.





In this photo, I saw the **leading lines** on this wall, and waited for someone to look through the peephole (there was a movie playing on the other side of the wall). The “**cherry on top**” is the man’s hand and sunglasses in the bottom-right.



“**Leading lines**” combined with the “**fishing technique**.” I saw the leading lines of this sculpture, and waited for the right subject to enter.

PERSPECTIVE & LEADING LINES

Another way you can integrate leading lines is with changing your perspective.

For example, one of the perspectives I love to embrace are low angles. By shooting at a low angle (crouching down), you make your subject “larger than life.” They also call this the “*superman effect*.” If you ever wonder how a 5 foot 7 inch Tom Cruise can look like 6+ feet in a movie, it is because they show him from a low angle/perspective.

When it comes to shooting street photography with different perspectives, I recommend trying to **embrace the extremes**: either very high-perspectives, or very low-perspectives. This makes for unique imagery that interests your viewer.

A common mistake that taller street photographers make is by shooting slightly-down on their subjects, making them look awkwardly small. Try to photograph your subject at least eye-to-eye level (which might mean crouching down slightly if you’re taller).

By crouching down, it is easier to integrate leading lines directly to your subject.



I saw this man in Hollywood, and I loved his tough look and hand-gesture. I crouched down and photographed him with a wide-angle 24mm lens. This accentuates his tough look, and you can also see all of the leading lines in the background which direct all of the viewer's attention on him. With leading-lines and low perspectives, try starting off with just 1 subject.



SEEING LEADING LINES AFTER-THE-FACT

Sometimes when you're shooting street photography, you don't see the leading lines or the composition while you're shooting it.

For example in this photograph I shot in Downtown LA in the night with a flash, I had no idea that there were leading lines in the image background (the spiked fence that leads your eyes to the subject).

But does the image has any less inherent value because you didn't intend the composition to turn out that way? Not necessarily.

I think 90% of street photography is about editing; deciding what your best photos are after-the-fact.

Therefore when it comes to leading lines or any other compositional technique, the more you study it, the more perceptive you will be in applying it while you shoot. However if you get "lucky" when you find your compositions unintentionally, be grateful.

One quote I love is from roman philosopher Seneca: "Luck is when preparation meets opportunity." The more you prepare yourself by studying composition, the more opportunities will present themselves to you.

Downtown LA, 2013



CHAPTER 1

DYNAMIC STREET PHOTOGRAPHY



HAND GESTURES

I soon discovered that I was more interested in a more dynamic form of street photography, in which I was constantly on the move, searching for interesting characters, and interesting emotions, gestures, and actions.

I soon discovered something that made much stronger compositions and images: capturing **hand gestures**.

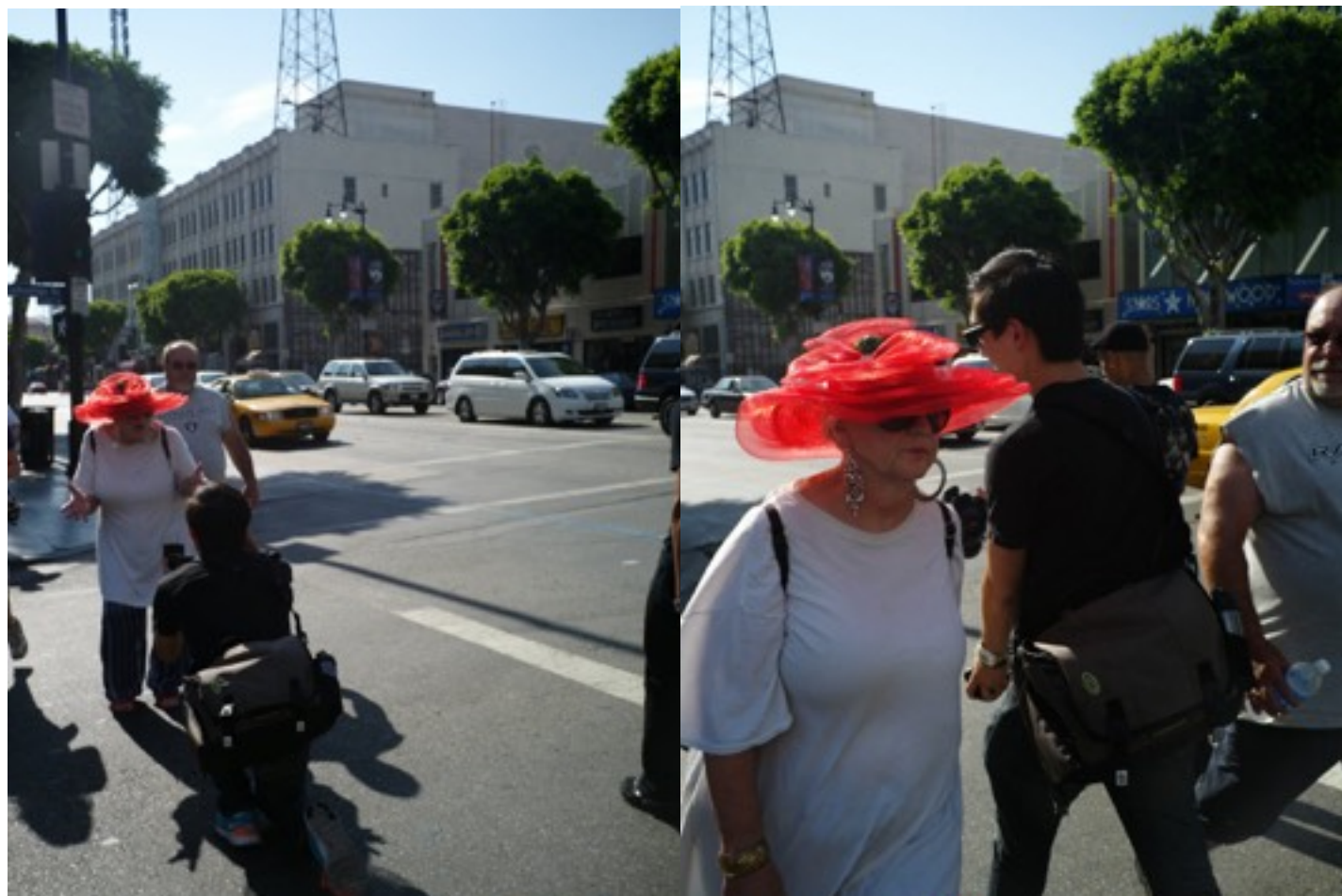
Why hand gestures? When you get hand gestures, you create dynamic movement. In this photograph of a woman I photographed in Hollywood in 2011, I saw her, crouched down, and was ready to take a photograph with a flash with a 24mm lens.

The second she saw me, she posed for me by giving me a “jazz hands” gesture. To me, this is what made the photograph.

Not only that, but I also like how the two people on her left and right balance out the frame (**multiple subjects best work in numbers of three**, more on that in future chapters).

If you want to make more dynamic compositions in street photography, don’t just photograph people walking with their hands by their side. Wait until you see someone making an interesting hand gesture before taking a photograph.

Another strategy is to **engage your subjects** and while they’re talking, wait until they start making hand gestures.





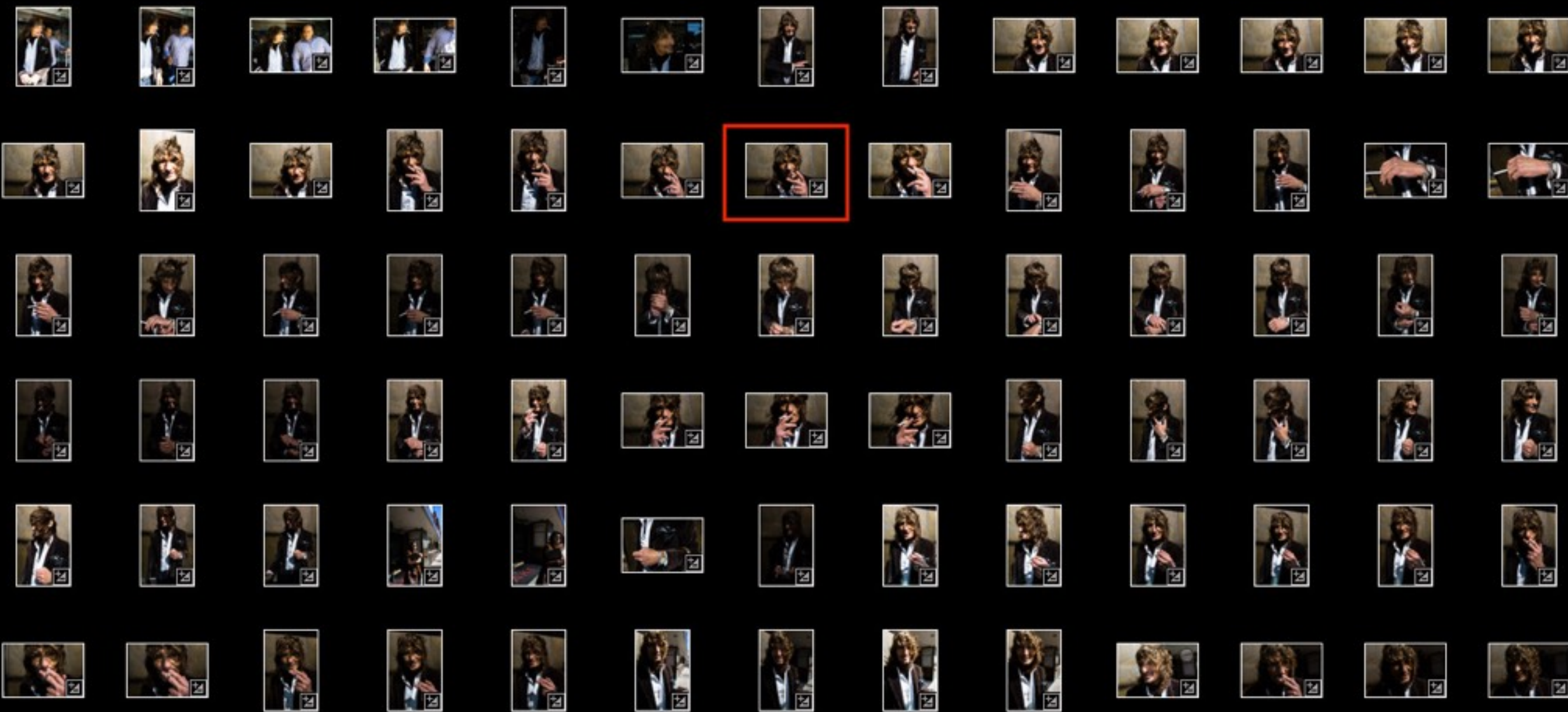
Downtown LA, 2011

I was in Downtown LA, and saw this amazing woman with these great nails. At first, I started to take photos of her face and nails. She was surprised, and told me she didn't want her face to be in the photograph. I then asked her if I could focus just on her nails. She had no problem with it, so I shot several of her just her hands (used a flash to make a black background).



Toronto, 2015

I was in Toronto with my good friend Neil Ta, and we stopped by a pretty swanky-looking hotel. We saw this interesting character by the door, and started chatting with him. I loved his rockstar look, so I asked if I could make some images of him. He was quite humbled, and I took lots of photos of him. My favorite shot was the hand-gesture of his fingers forming a “V” around his cigarette.



Contact Sheet: Toronto, 2015

If we take a closer look at my “contact sheet” of my Toronto photo, you can see how I took a total of 78 photos of this gentleman. I started off by looking for a simple background for him to stand against. In the beginning I just got photos of him standing, and I wanted to make a more “dynamic” shot of him via a hand gesture. So I asked him to light up a cigarette and started to take many different photos of his hand close to his face. When you are “working the scene” and taking lots of photos of your subject, try to make horizontal and vertical photos (preferably with their hand close to their face). You never really know which photo is going to be the best when you are shooting. Separate the “shooting” phase and the “editing phase” (wait until you go home before you decide to choose your favorite shots from the day).

REPEATING GESTURES

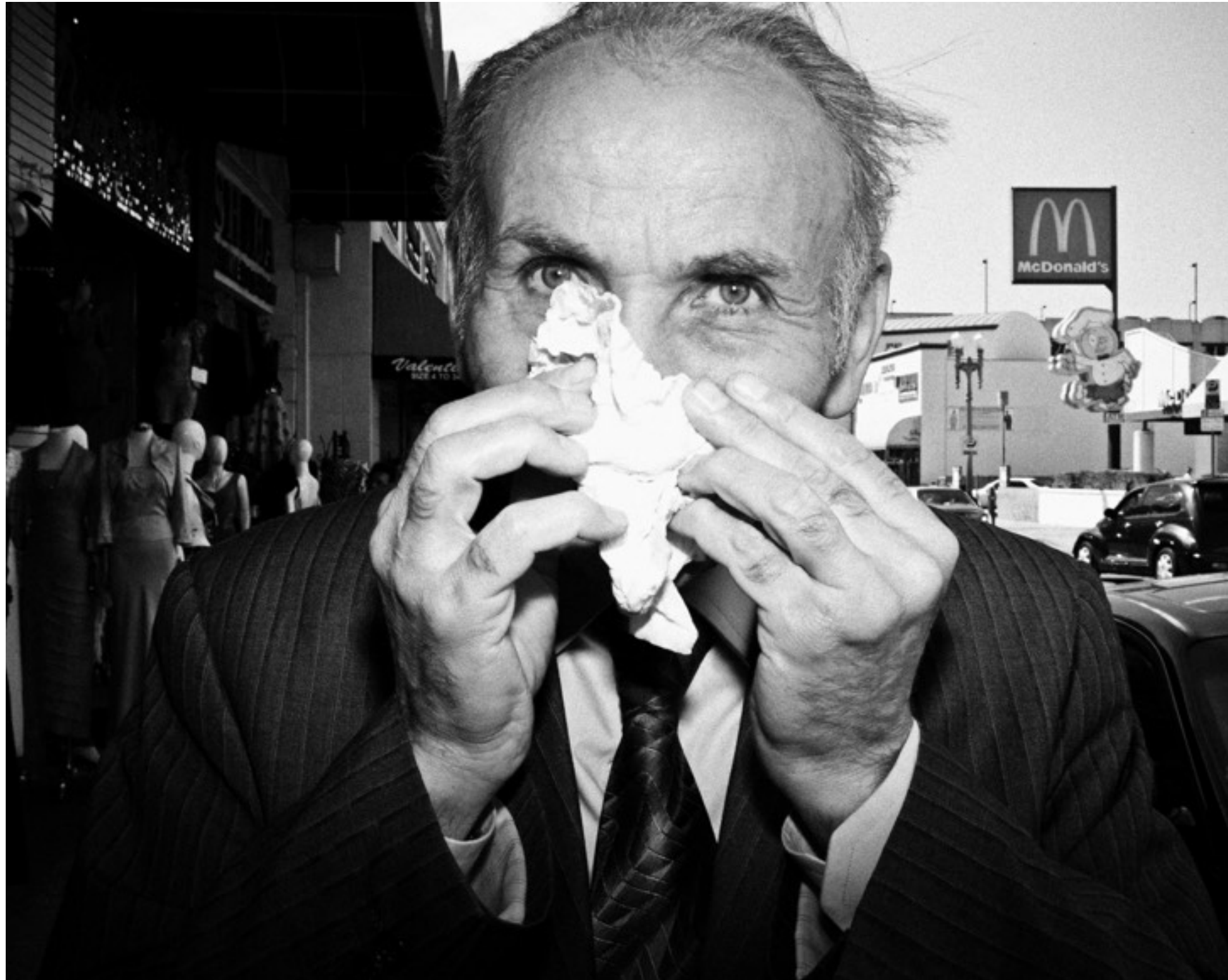
Sometimes when you're shooting street photography, you will see people repeat hand gestures.

For example, I was walking around in Downtown LA and saw this gentleman blowing his nose. I first missed the moment, and then waited for him to blow his nose again (people generally repeat their gestures on the street).

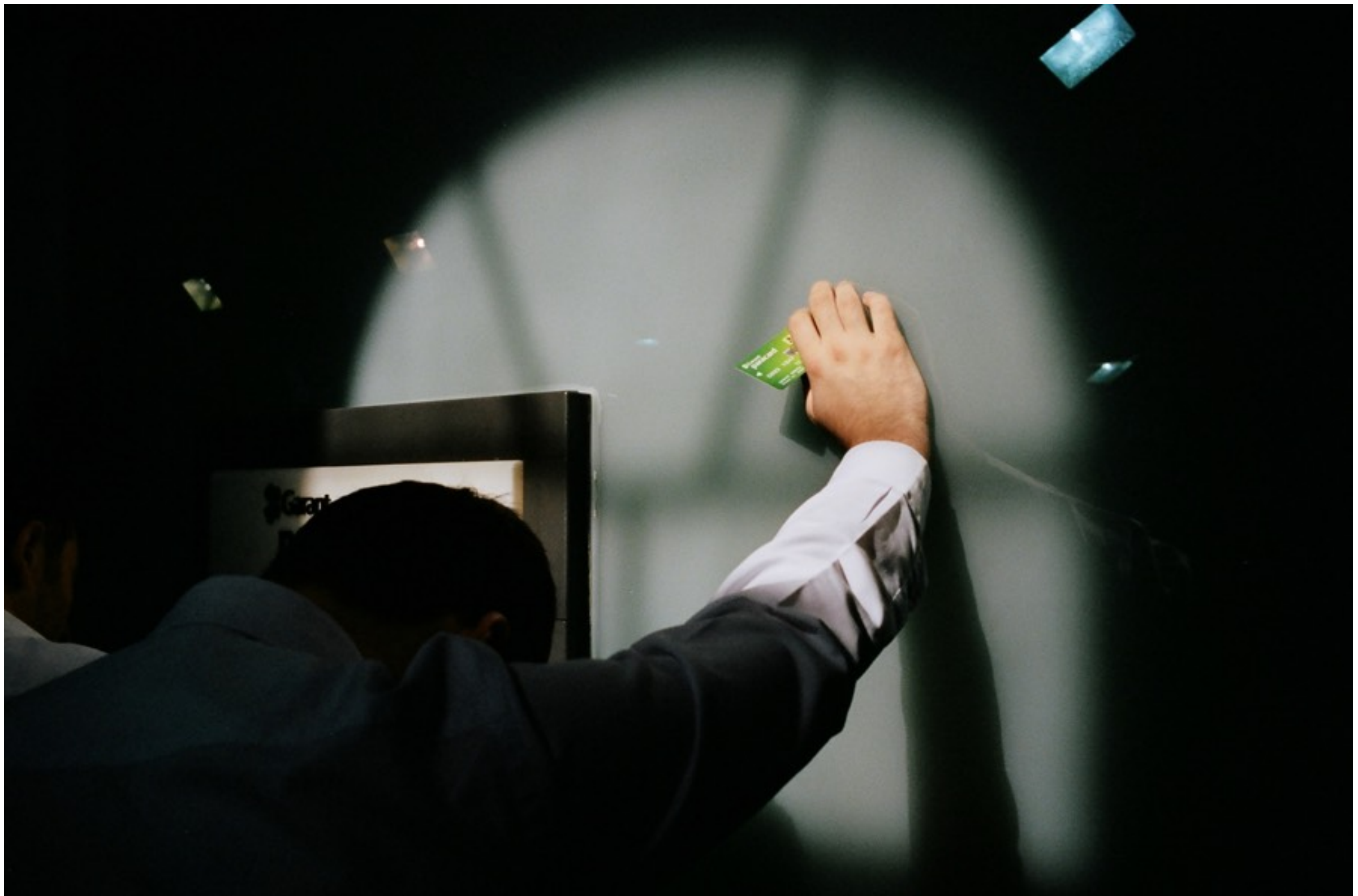
So when he lifted his tissue to blow his nose again, I lifted my camera to take a photo. However he noticed me, and dropped his tissue. I then told him, "Oh no, it's okay, go ahead and blow your nose!" He then laughed and listened to me, and blew his nose again, and I clicked again.

If you see someone do an interesting gesture on the street and you miss the "decisive moment," ask them to do it again.

Now you might be asking, "Doesn't that ruin the 'authenticity' of an image?" To a degree, yes, but I think as a street photographer, our job is



Less about capturing "authenticity" and more about creating our own subjective view of reality. So I have no personal qualms about asking people to repeat hand gestures or to pose for me in a certain way. My only suggestion is that if someone asks you whether a shot is "posed" or not, to simply be truthful and tell the backstory of the image (if someone is interested enough to hear the story).



NOT SHOWING FACES

To make a more mysterious street photograph, don't show the faces of your subjects. Only focus on their hand gestures and body language. I saw this man hunched over an ATM in Istanbul, and I also saw the dramatic light hitting the wall. To me the light

looks almost holy in nature, and I could also feel his pain and misery (perhaps not having enough money in his bank account). I feel that by focusing on his hand alone, it made for a better story and image. So when shooting street photography, try not to show faces, and make your photos more obscure.



CHAPTER 2

HORIZONTAL VS VERTICAL FRAMING

WHEN TO SHOOT HORIZONTALS VS VERTICALS?

One of the common questions I get when it comes to framing is when a street photographer should frame a photograph as a horizontal (landscape) shot, and when to frame as a vertical (portrait) shot.

My practical suggestion is this: **whenever possible, shoot both.**

When you are shooting street photography, it is difficult to always tell whether the shot will work better as a horizontal or a vertical shot. A lot of realizing what “works” happens after-the-fact (when you’re looking at the images in the editing phase).

However here are some pointers:

HORIZONTAL SHOTS

I generally frame images as horizontal shots when the scene has predominately horizontal lines, and stretches across the frame (left to right).

For example, in the image on the right, you can see that there are strong horizontal lines going across the frame. Also because there are four men all in a horizontal line, shooting a horizontal frame felt more natural. There would be no way I could fit all these men into the frame as a vertical, so horizontal was the obvious choice.





When inspecting my contact sheet above, you can see I took 8 photos of the scene (“working the scene”) because I wasn’t sure which framing would work the best at the time. However I still had the intuitive sense that a horizontal framing would work best.

VERTICAL SHOTS

When it comes to framing a scene as a vertical image, I generally do so to **eliminate clutter and distractions** in the background. A vertical photograph captures less information in a scene than a horizontal shot. Therefore when you are shooting “street portraits” of a single-subject, a vertical frame generally works best.

Most street photographers I know have a hard time “seeing vertically” (because as humans we see the world horizontally with our two eyes). However for me, I prefer verticals, as they **help focus the viewer’s attention directly to your subject**.





SHOOTING BOTH VERTICALS & HORIZONTALS

In this contact sheet above, I stopped this interesting character with tattoos and asked if I could take a few photos of him. He obliged, and I started to take many different photographs, first working in vertical format (taking 5 vertical photos), then 2 horizontal photos (just in case), 7 more vertical photos (I thought this frame looked better intuitively), 6 more horizontal shots (some with flash and some without), and lastly with 3 vertical shots.

When you see an interesting person, scene, or moment, **take as many photos as humanly possible**. You will only see and experience it once in your life. so try to get the best possible image.

Whenever I see a really interesting scene, I get really excited and can't always think rationally or analytically. I shoot from my gut, and follow my instincts. However I still try to remind myself: **“add variety”** and to switch things up between horizontal and vertical photos (just in-case). You never know which shot will work the best.

As a rule-of-thumb, I generally think **it is better to “overshoot” a scene than to “under-shoot” a scene**. Why? Every time you click the shutter you have a slightly higher chance of getting a stronger image. The more times you shoot a basketball, the more likely you are to score a 3-pointer. But don't just shoot mindlessly (like a machine gun), try to work the scene from different angles, perspectives, and vary your timing, use of flash (or natural light), and frame.



CHAPTER 3

TRIANGLES

TRIANGLES

One of the strongest dynamic compositions you can utilize in street photography are triangular compositions.

Triangles are dynamic because they add balance and harmony to a photograph. They also expand to fill the frame.

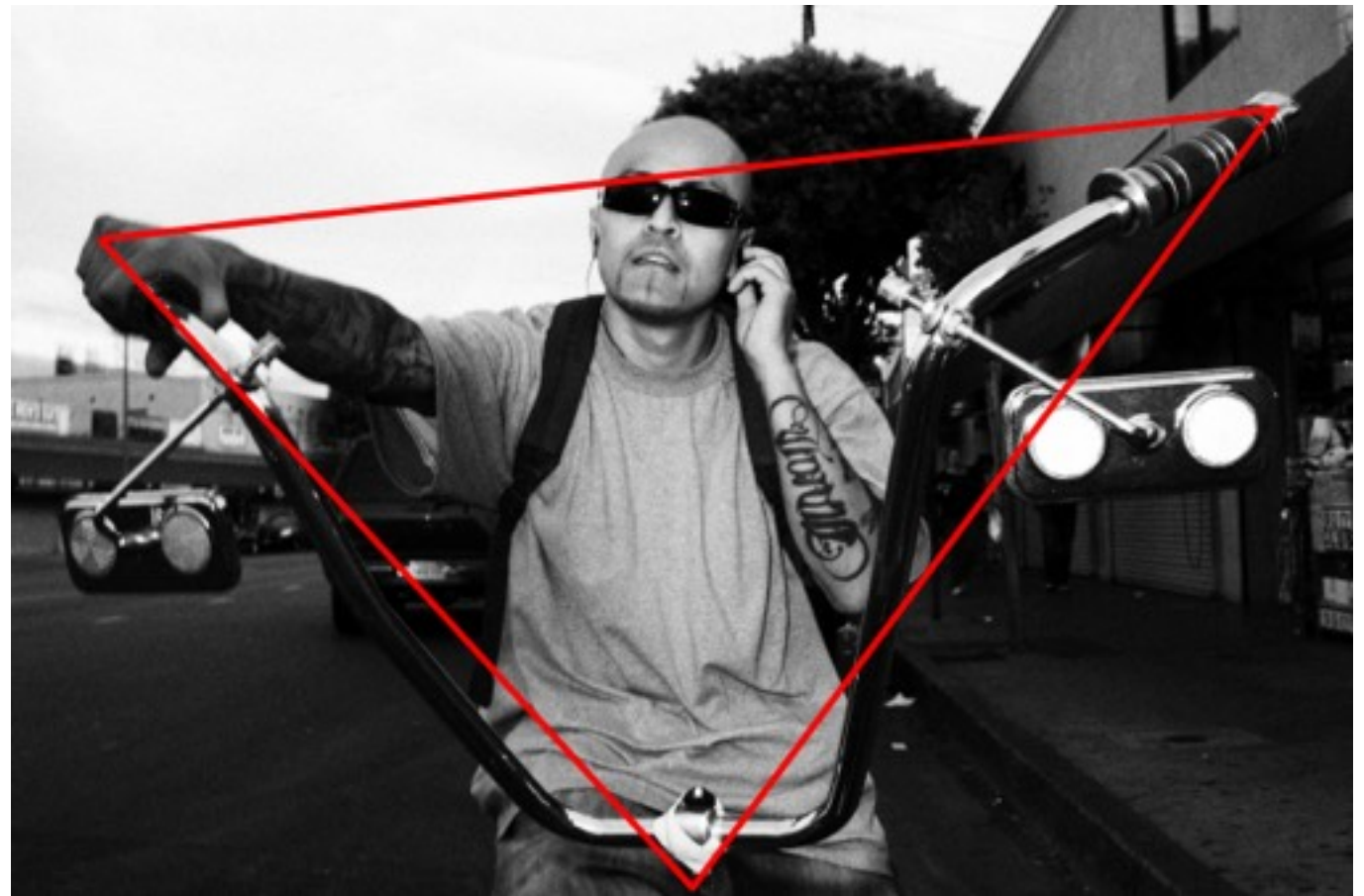
In this scene, I saw a pretty tough-looking guy in Downtown LA. I told him I liked his tattoos and crouched down and took a photograph.

I took several photos, and crouched to frame him in-between the handlebars of his “low-rider” bicycle. I took a few photographs, and my favorite photo was when he adjusted the earbud in his left ear, and made an interesting hand gesture (which also showed the tattoo in his left arm).

I discovered that this photograph had a strong triangle composition after-the-fact.

One of the things I learned about composition is that you can’t always see all of the compositional aspects while you’re shooting. **You end up seeing a lot of the composition after-the-fact.**

The more you shoot street photography, the more you will start to internalize composition as an **intuition**. Know that also composition is a great tool to use during the editing phase (choosing your best images).



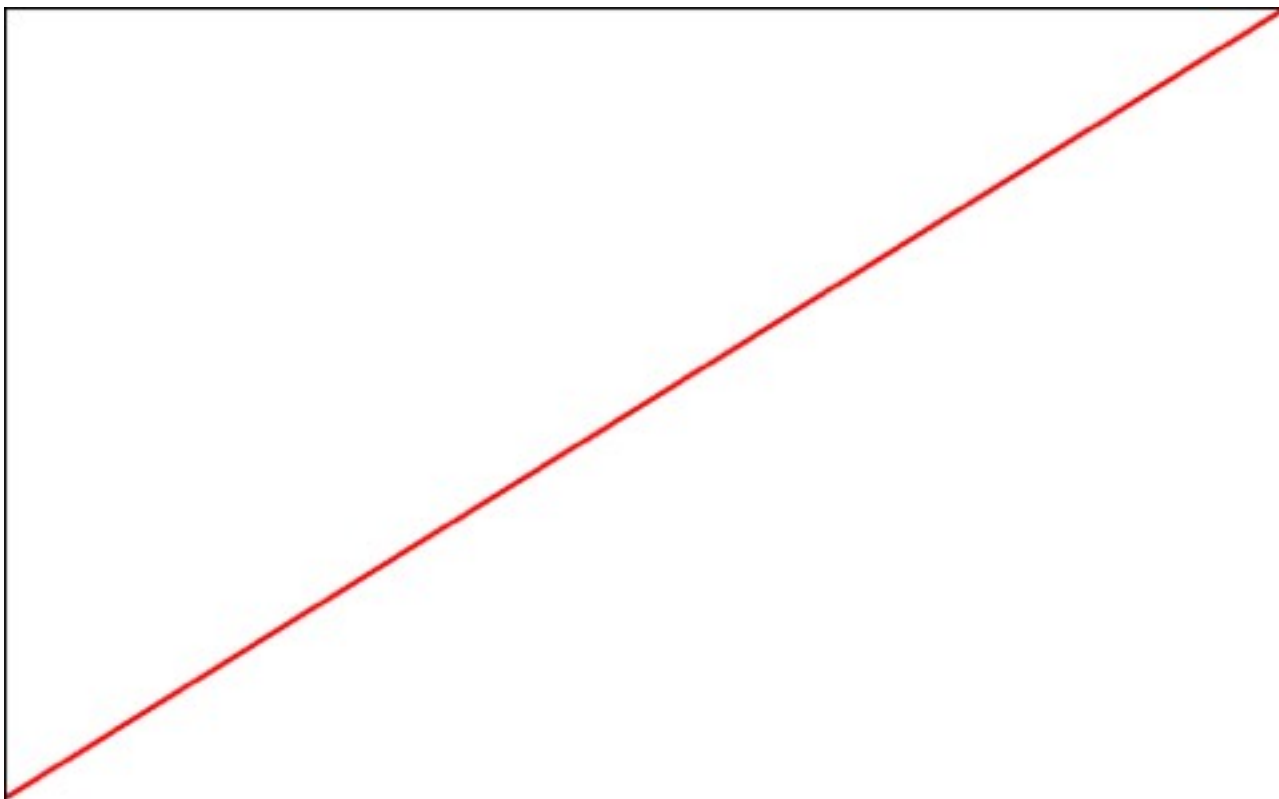
THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE: INTRODUCTION

If you want to delve deeper into composition with triangles, let us explore the concept of the “**golden triangle**” or also known as the “golden section rectangle.”

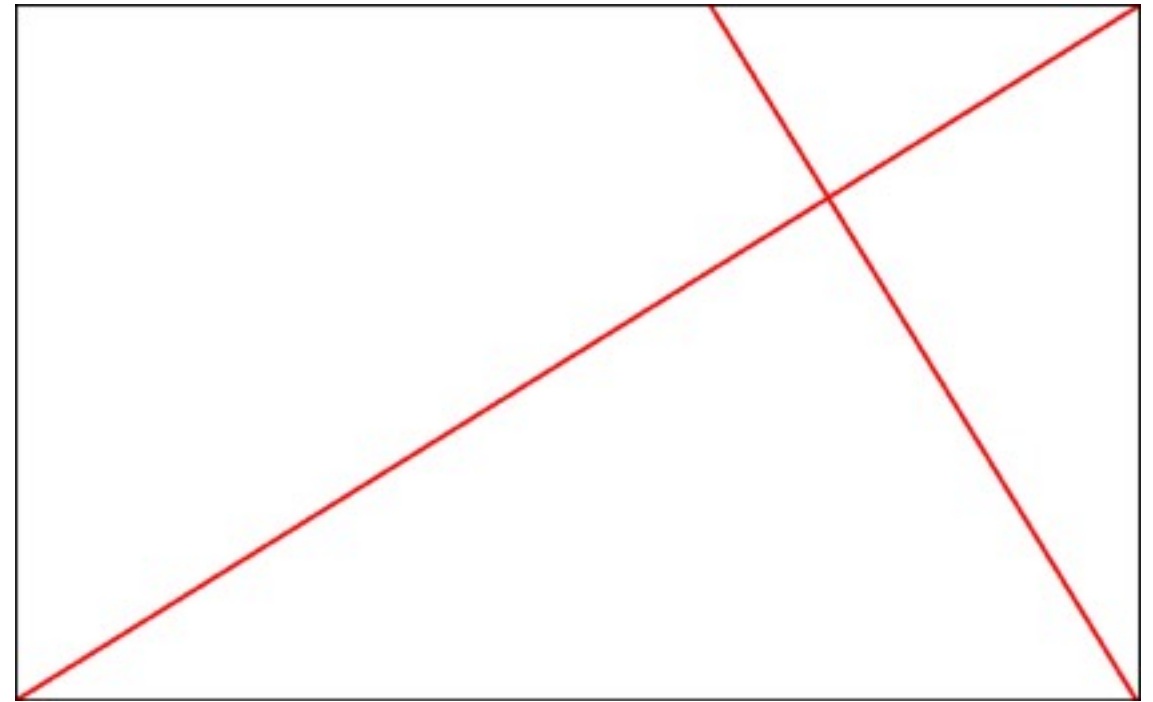
The concept derives from the “**golden section**,” in which mathematicians, architects, and artists have discovered that the ideal ratio for design is **1:1.618**. They have found this ratio throughout nature, man-made objects, buildings, and other forms of classical art.

So how do you build your own “golden triangle?”

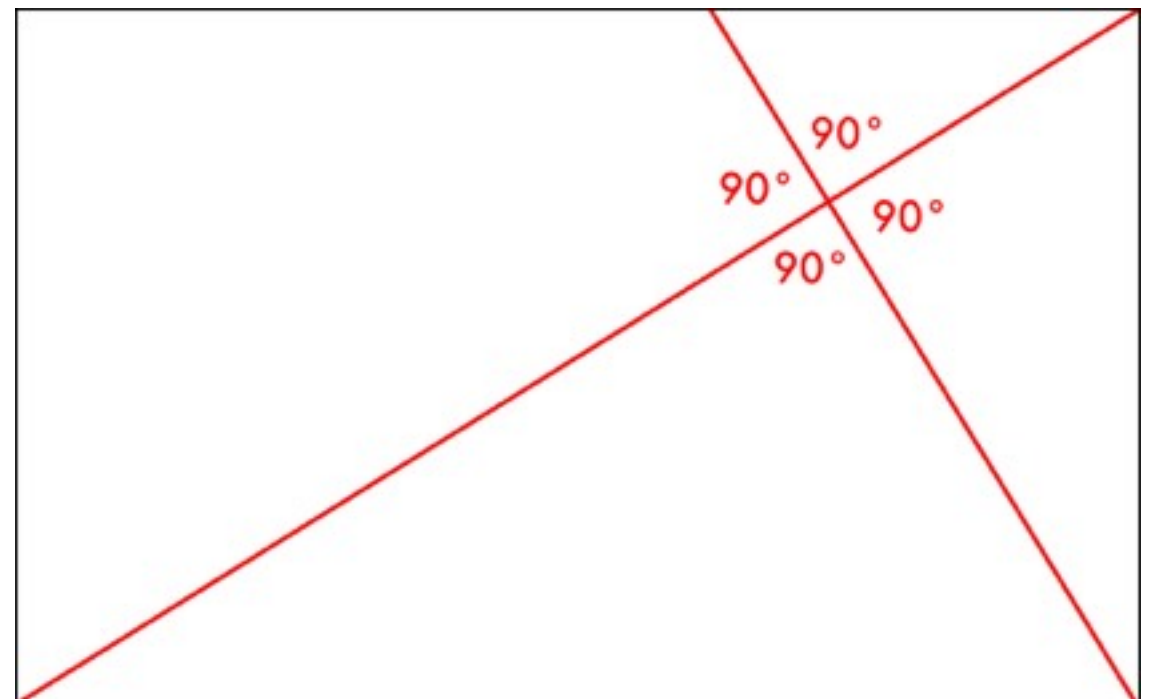
Step 1: Draw a diagonal line from the bottom-left of a rectangle to the top-right. Note you can also do this from the bottom-right of the frame to the top-left of the frame.



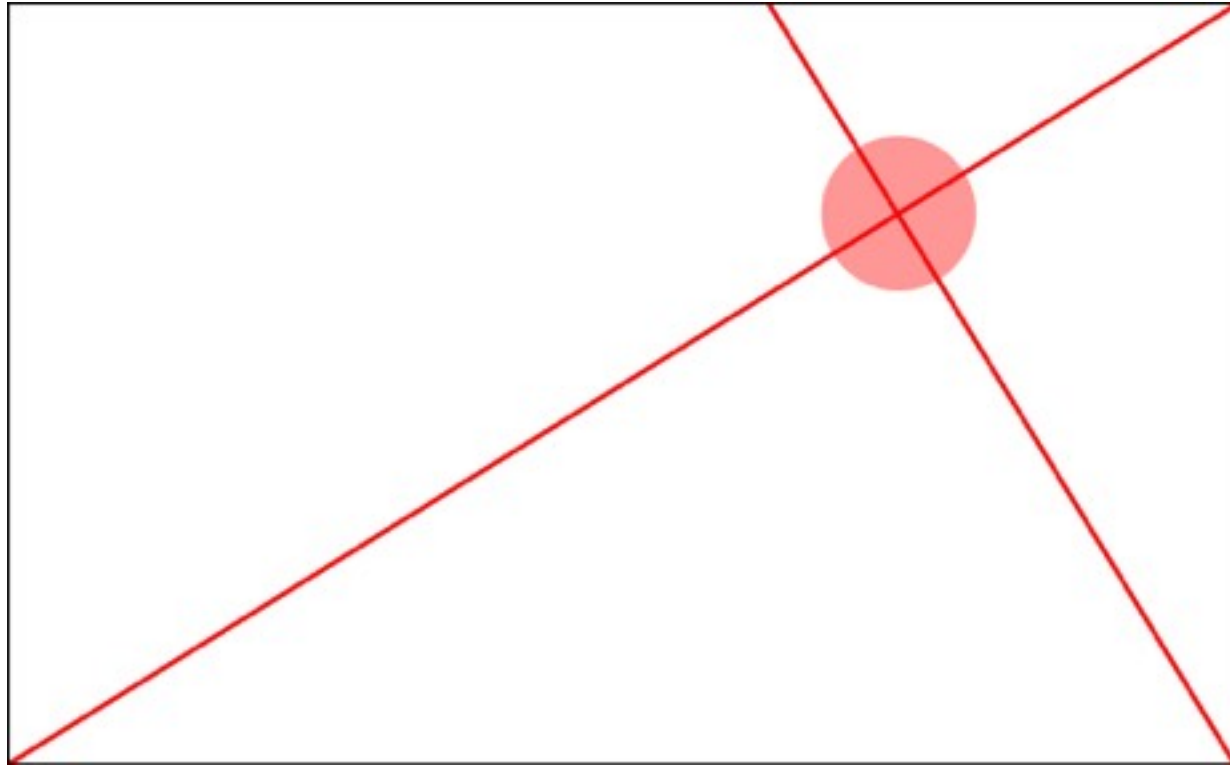
Step 2: Draw another diagonal line that intersects your original diagonal line at a 90 degree angle (perpendicular line).



Note in the diagram below, you have 90 degrees in-between all of the intersecting diagonal lines:

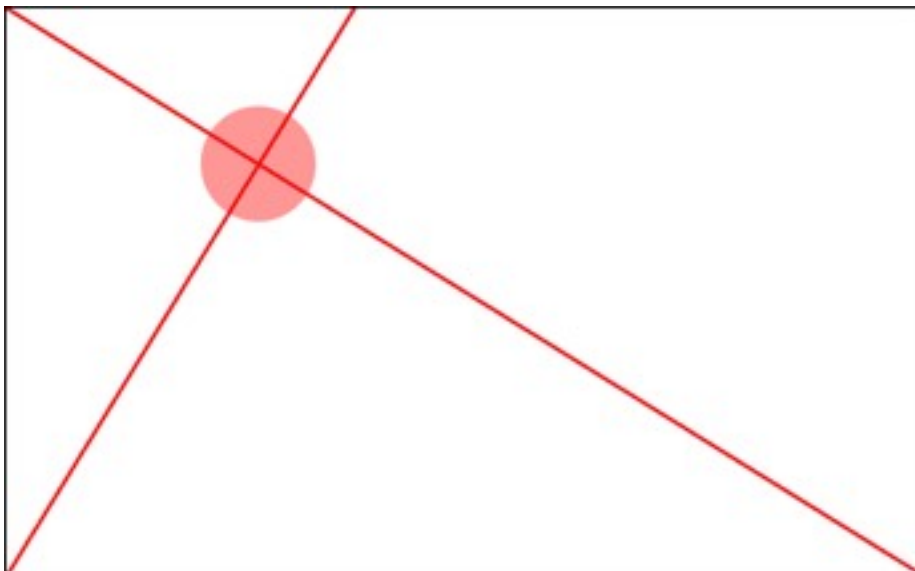


The point in which all of the diagonal lines intersect is called the “**eye**” because your eye is naturally drawn to that part of the image:

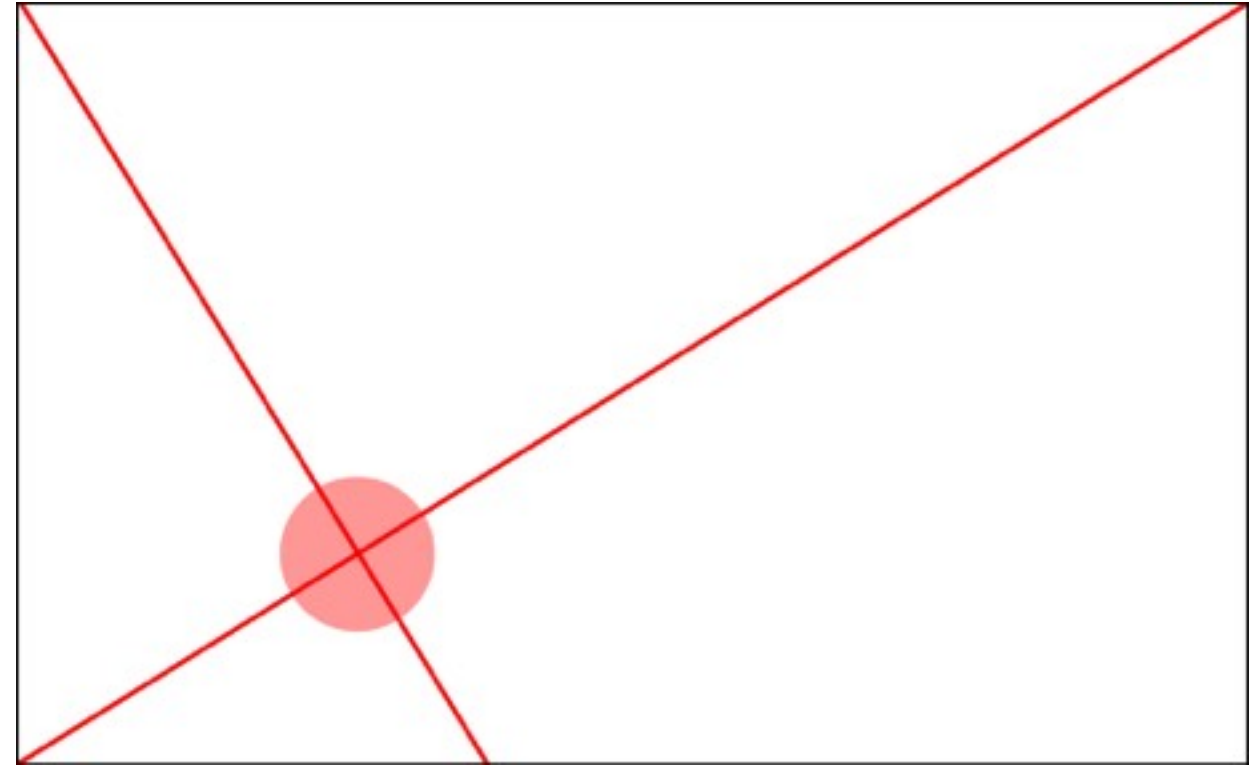


When using the “golden triangle,” you want to put your main subject or detail in that part of the frame. That will draw your viewer to look specifically at that part of the frame.

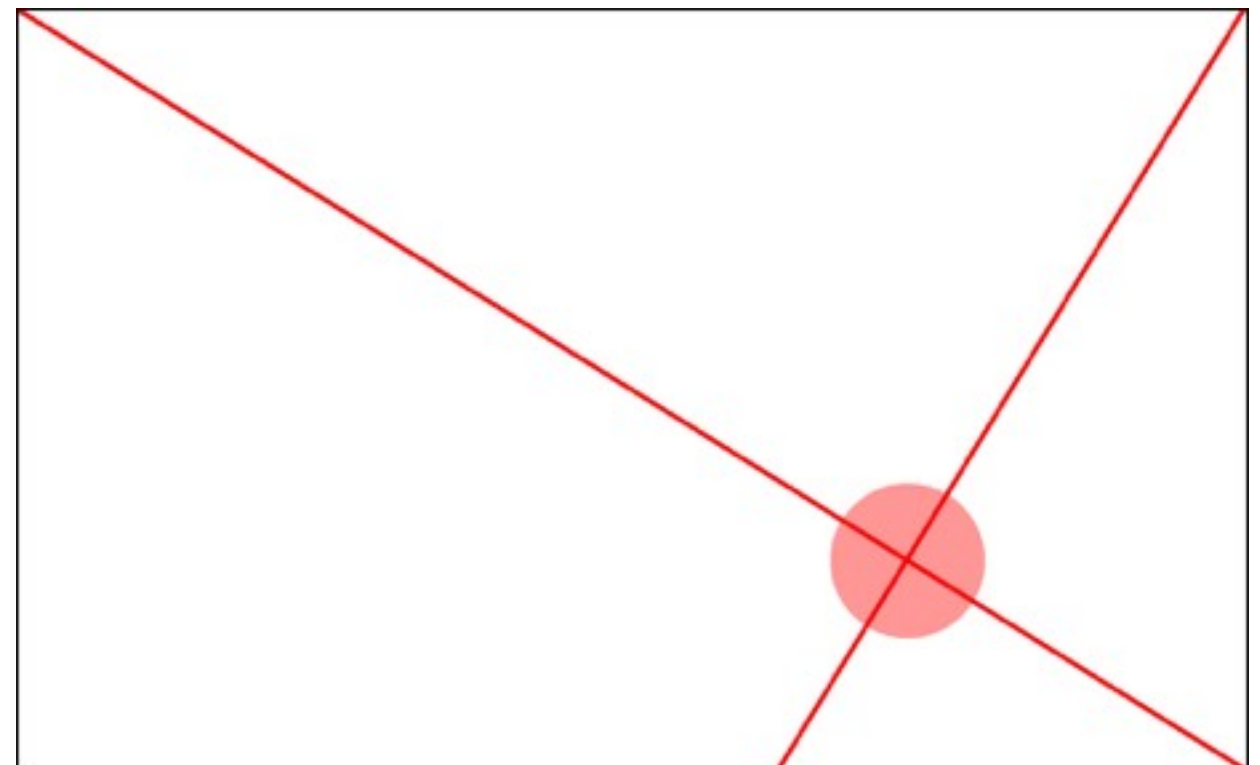
As I mentioned earlier, you can rotate the golden triangle to draw your eyes to different parts of the frame. Here it is in the top-left:



In this position below, we’ve positioned the intersecting diagonals and the “eye” into the bottom-left corner of the frame:



Lastly, we have the intersecting diagonals in the bottom-right:



You are probably familiar with the “**rule of thirds**” in which you divide the frame into thirds (Figure 1 on the right).

While the rule of thirds is a good guide for beginners to use in their photography, it isn’t as dynamic as the golden triangle. The golden triangle emphasizes diagonal lines (which are more dynamic than just horizontal and vertical lines as shown in the rule of thirds).

As a general guideline, you can remember how to position the golden triangle by roughly estimating that it is the same location as where the rule-of-thirds lines intersect (Figure 2, bottom).

You can see the rule of thirds overlaid the golden triangle (Figure 3, as shown in the bottom-right). Not exactly the same intersecting point, but quite close.

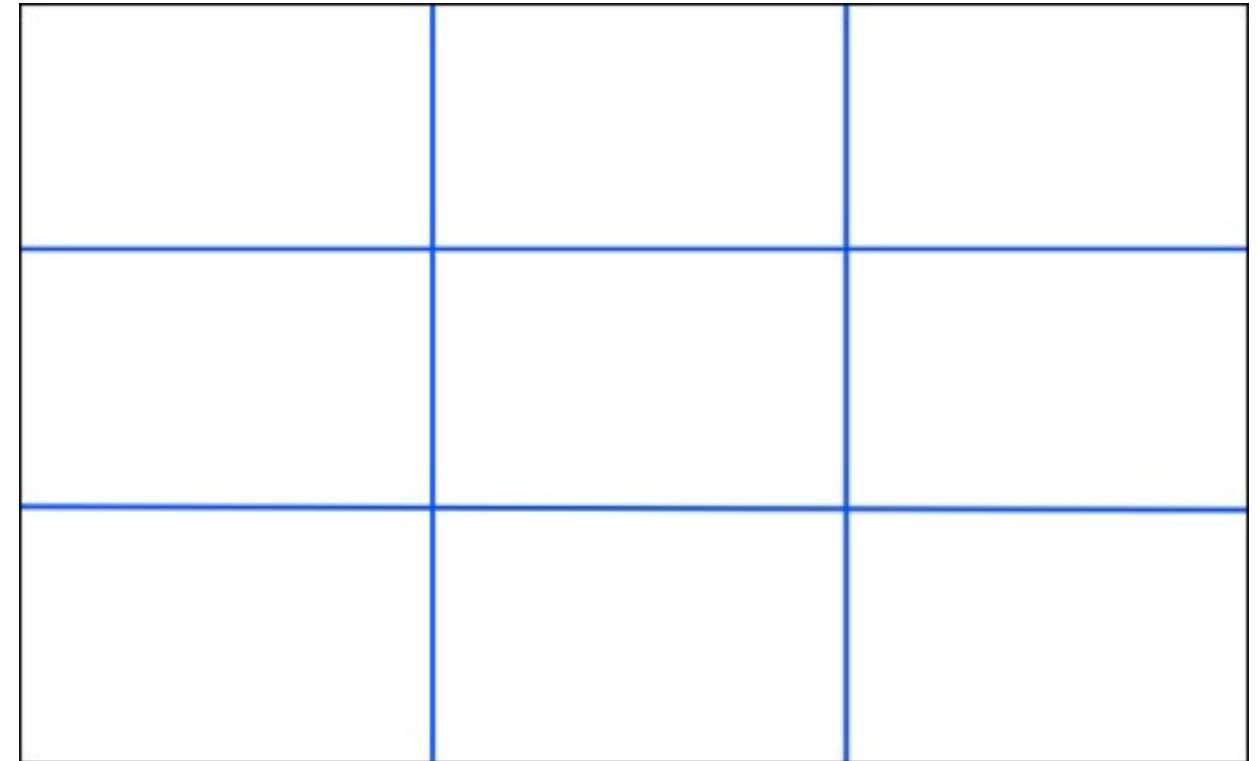


Figure 1: The rule of thirds grid

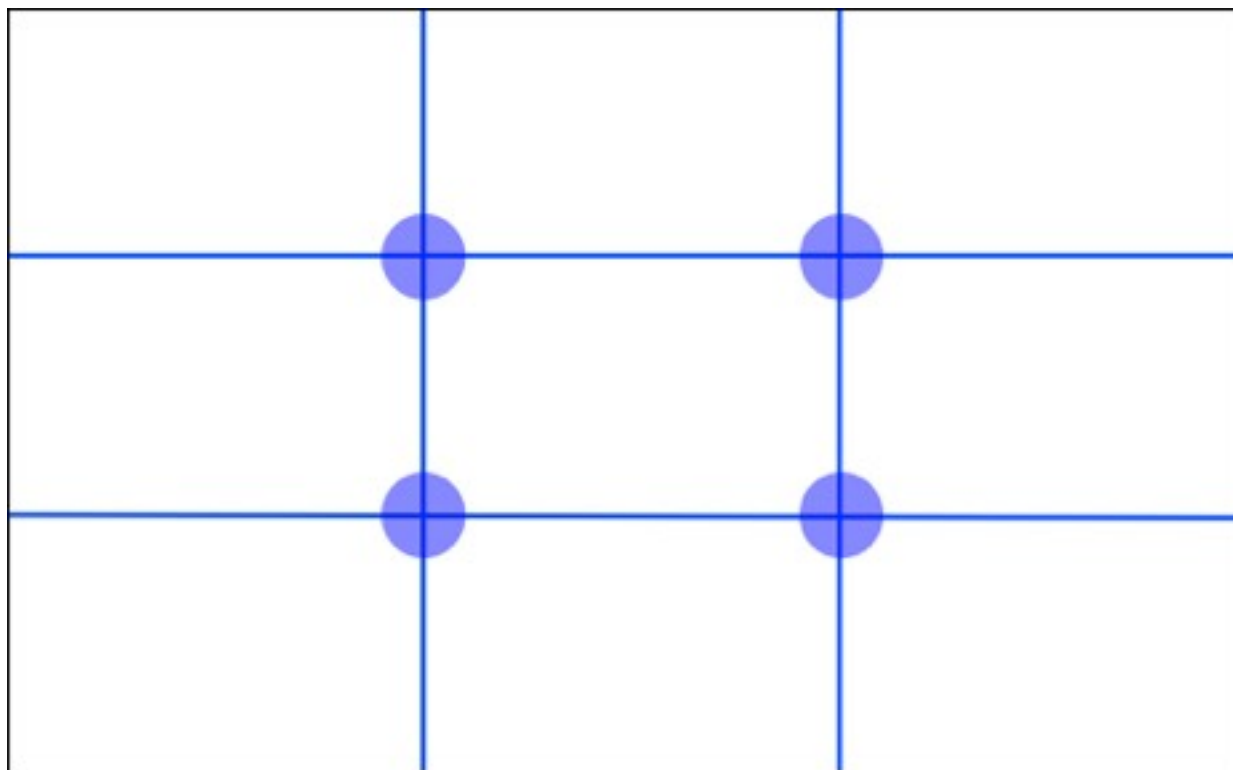


Figure 2: The rule of thirds (blue) overlaid the golden triangle (red)

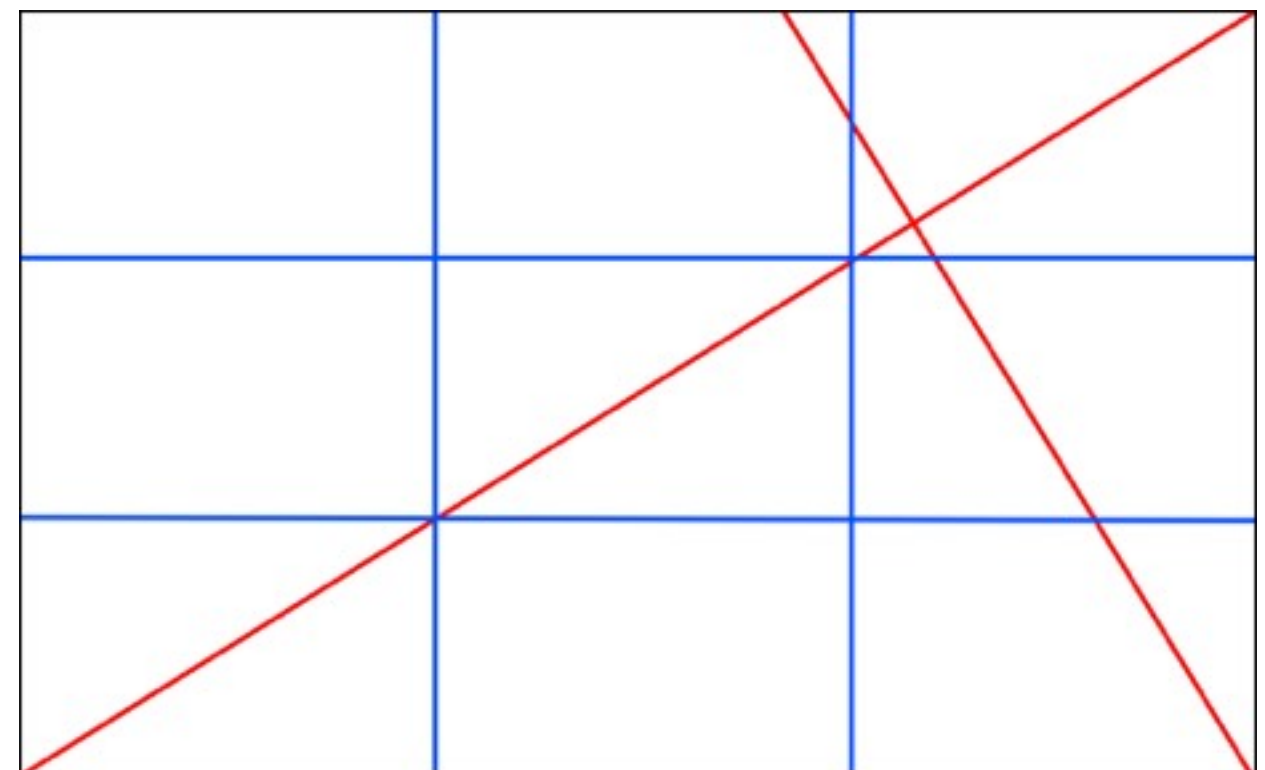


Figure 3: The rule of thirds (blue) overlaid the golden triangle (red)

APPLYING THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

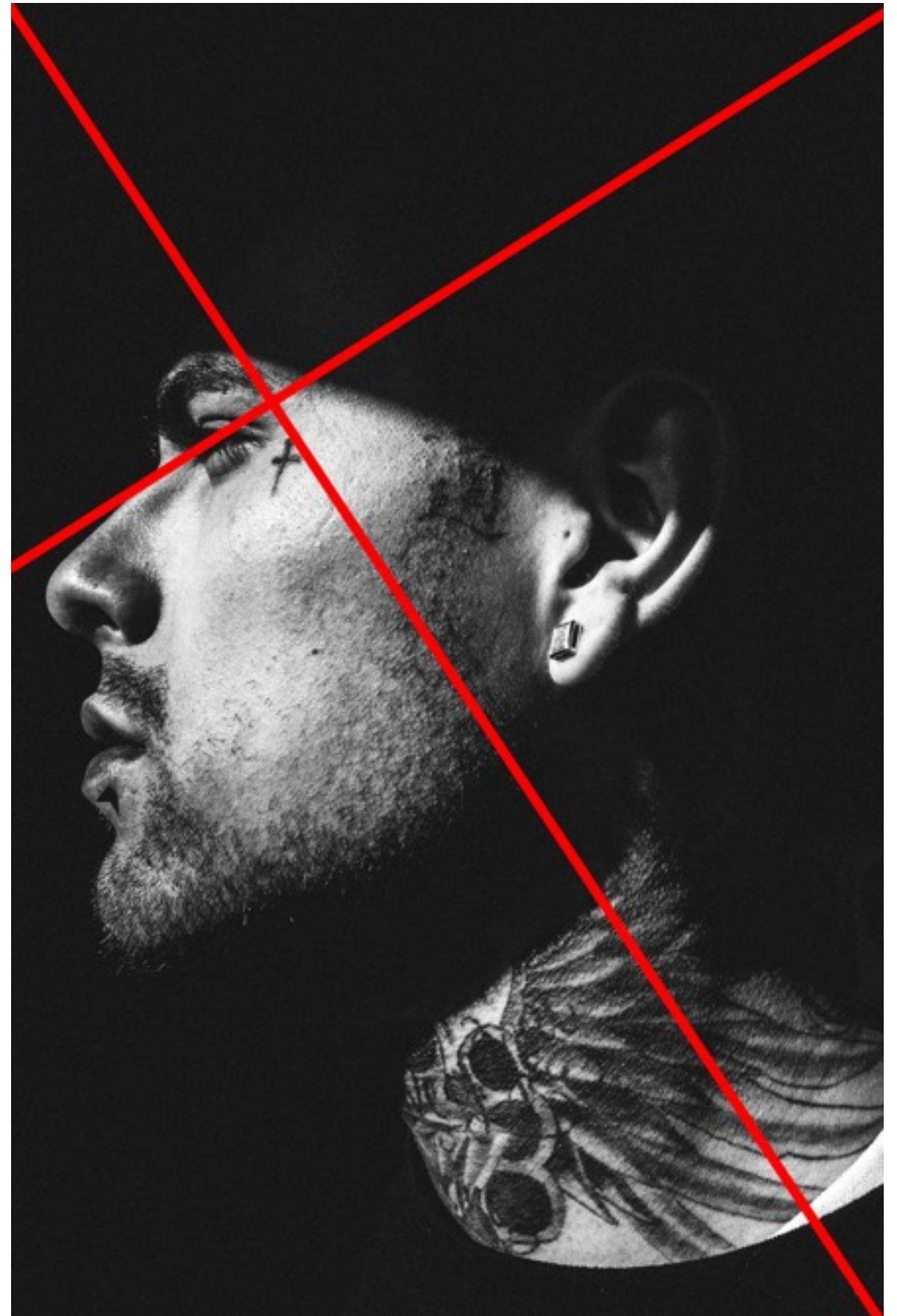
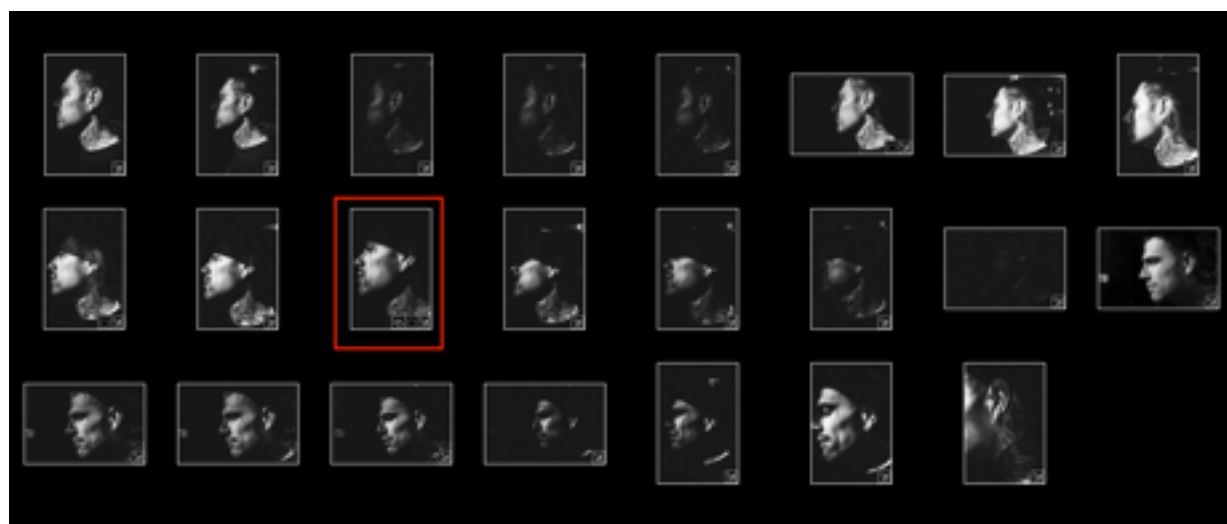
Honestly when you're out shooting on the streets, you're not going to see red and blue lines embedded on your eyeball (unless the future Google glasses has some sort of function for this).

However you can still apply the "golden triangle" in your street photography in a pragmatic way.

The first rule is not to center your subjects. Just remember to position them slightly off-center (into the top-right, top-left, bottom-left, or bottom-right).

On the right, I captured this image in Downtown LA. I saw the dramatic light on this man's face, and asked him for permission to make his photograph. He said okay, and I ended up taking a lot of photographs (some with flash, some without flash), all while setting the exposure of my camera (Ricoh GR) to -2 (in "P" or program mode).

I think the photograph has strong balance and a strong mood to the photograph. I didn't notice until after I took the shot that the position of the man's eye follows the golden triangle very closely.





You can also apply the “golden triangle” not to just faces, but also hands.

For this photograph, I was in SF, and saw this woman smoking a cigarette with an interesting iPhone case (brass knuckles meets spikes). The pink of her hands also were fascinating.

I asked if I could take a photograph of her hands, and she agreed. I was shooting with a Ricoh GR in macro mode, and took the photograph from all these different angles and perspectives.

While I was shooting this photograph, I intentionally tried to create a dynamic diagonal composition. I didn’t see any red lines in my mind, but I followed my intuition and instincts, in terms of what “felt right” when composing this image on a diagonal axis.

Ultimately the best photograph was the one in which her hands formed a diagonal composition, with the cigarette also facing down in a diagonal direction.

When we apply the golden triangle grid over the image, we can see that this image fits quite well. The organization of the elements of the image are in harmony, and also fill the frame.

Tip: when composing a scene, don’t just take one shot. **“work the scene”** from many directions and perspectives.



APPLYING COMPOSITION AFTER?

One of the main questions photographers ask me is whether you can apply composition when you actually see the scene (or whether you use it as a tool to analyze your compositions after the fact). One of the best quotes to answer that question is from Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the pioneers of the genre of street photography and a master of composition:

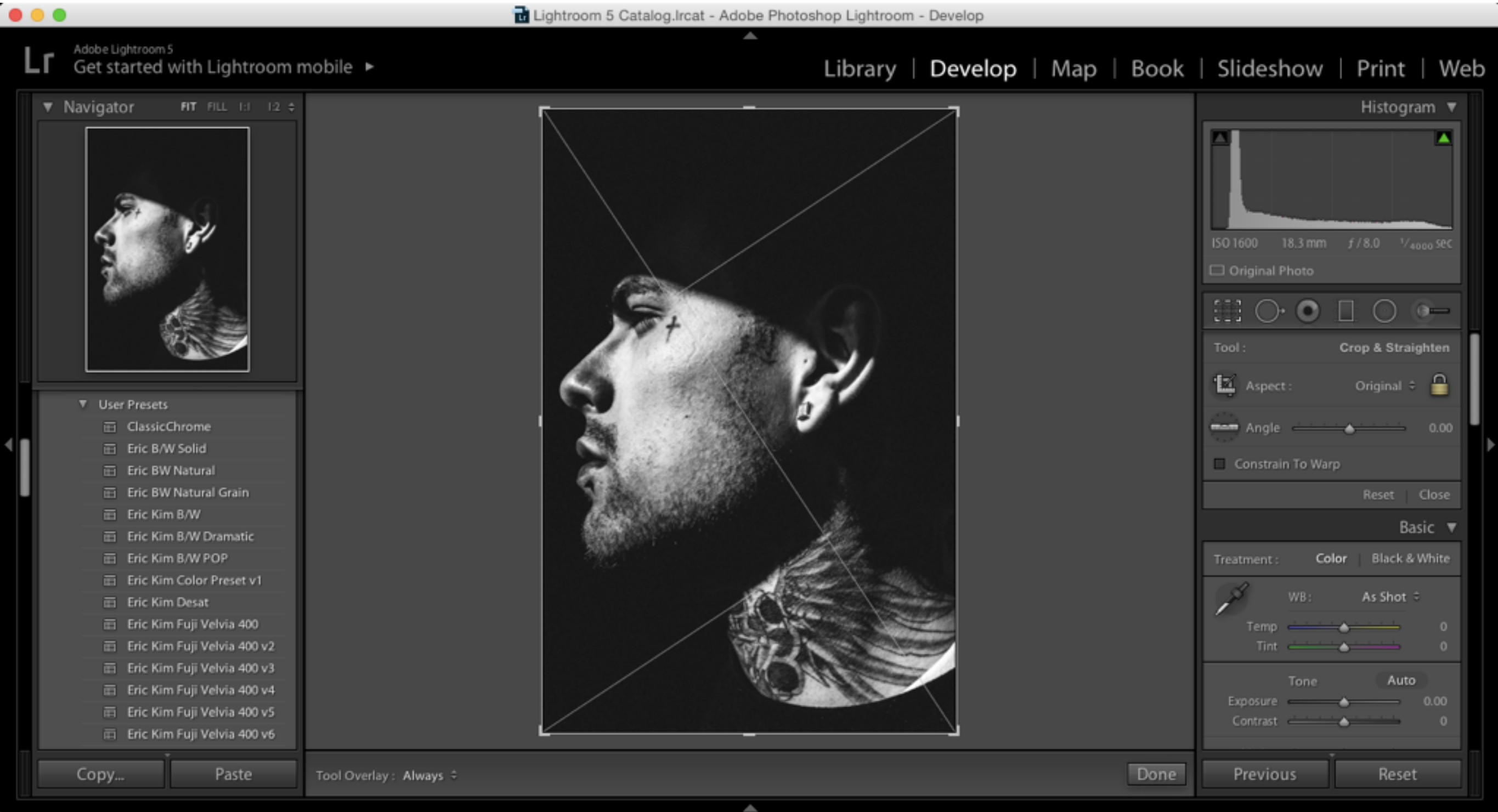
*“In applying the Golden Rule, the only pair of compasses at the photographer’s disposal is his own pair of eyes. Any geometrical analysis, any reducing of the picture to a schema, can be done only (because of its very nature) **after** the photograph has been taken, developed, and printed– and then **it can be used only for a post-mortem examination of the picture.**” - Henri Cartier-Bresson*

In the two photos above, I took many different versions of the man’s hands. But while I was editing (choosing my best images), I had no idea which photograph to keep and ditch.

When you are in a similar dilemma (deciding between choosing two images), you can apply the “golden triangle” (or any other compositional technique) to help assist your decision.

For these two photographs, I ultimately decided to choose the image on the left side of the frame. Why? Because the apple in the top-left photograph better followed the diagonal of the golden triangle. In the other photograph (top right), the apple didn’t follow the diagonal as well.

I have personally found that the more you analyze your photos after-the-fact, the better your intuition becomes.



THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OVERLAY IN LIGHTROOM

If you use Adobe Lightroom, you can access the golden triangle overlay by going to the “**Develop**” module (hotkey “**D**”) and then pressing the **crop** button (hotkey “**R**”). Once you access the crop button, you can press “**O**” to change the **overlay** of the different crop options. Scroll through the different options, then once you find the golden triangle overlay, you can press “**Shift+O**” to change the direction of the overlay.

WORKING THE SCENE

One of the common myths in street photography is regarding the fabled “decisive moment.” When people think about the decisive moment, they think that they are only allowed to take one photograph of a scene. However in reality, most street photographers (including Henri Cartier-Bresson) take many photographs of the same scene (to get one good photograph). Cartier-Bresson also once famously said: *“You have to milk the cow a lot and get lots of milk to make a little piece of cheese.”* So when it comes to street photography, you need to work the scene a lot (and if you’re lucky) you can get a good shot.

In this photograph, I was teaching a workshop in Downtown LA and it was during golden hour (sun was setting). This caused the light to be very dramatic, and for strong shadows. Me and two of my students stopped this woman and asked if we could make her portrait. She said okay, and stood still against a simple background.

I then saw that the shadow of her nose was elongated, just like pinocchio! This was caused because the shadow of her nose hit the corner of a wall (which made the shadow appear longer). I immediately started to **“work the scene”** by taking lots of photos from different angles, distances, and perspectives. I took 18 photos in total, and in frame #6 all of the elements lined up perfectly.





TO CROP OR NOT TO CROP?

Henri Cartier-Bresson was famous for being anti-cropping. This is what he said:

“If you start cutting or cropping a good photograph, it means death to the geometrically correct interplay of proportions. Besides, it very rarely happens that a photograph which was feebly composed can be saved by reconstruction of its composition under the darkroom’s enlarger; the integrity of vision is no longer there.” - Henri Cartier-Bresson

Personally, I used to be a “crop-a-holic” in which I always cropped my photographs. However I personally found that constantly cropping made me a lazy photographer. Rather than “working the scene” and trying to get the photo right “**in-camera**,” I just told myself in the back of my head: “Eh, I don’t need to get the framing or composition perfect. I can always crop it later.”

However after reading the above quote by Henri Cartier-Bresson, I decided to try an experiment: go an entire year without cropping any of my photographs.

I found this to be the best experiment I ever have done in my photography. Because I knew that I wasn’t allowed to crop my photographs, I tried to frame my photos as perfectly as I could in-camera. This caused me to hustle harder when shooting, and also be more diligent when framing my images.

Ultimately I think it is fine to crop, but if you crop too much, it will

change the perspective of your images too much, and cause there to be an inconsistency to your artistic vision.

Sometimes if you crop you won’t change the “look” of the image too much. For example in the next page, in Figure 1 I took a photograph that I shot from a distance that was a bit loose around the edges of the frame. I then cropped it in closer (Figure 2). Figure 3 is the final cropped image, and Figure 4 is the photograph I didn’t crop. Note how they are actually quite similar looking.

Ultimately I think it is fine to crop images. In-fact, even Henri Cartier-Bresson cropped one of his most famous images (a photograph of a man jumping over a puddle). I rarely crop any of my photographs (only around 1% of the time). When I actually do crop my images, I try not to crop more than 5-10% of the outside edges.

If you feel that cropping an image will make your composition stronger, go for it. But don’t feel like you need to always crop every single photograph. Not only that, but sometimes having a little imperfection around the edges of your images add more interest. Over-cropping a photograph makes it feel too clinical and almost “too perfect” (if there is such a thing).

Furthermore, I recommend when you’re cropping, **keep the aspect ratio consistent**. For most photo processing applications, if you hold the “Shift” key while dragging the edges to crop, this will prevent you from cropping your photograph into non-native aspect ratios.

If you’re also a “crop-a-holic,” try to go a full year without cropping, and I guarantee that you will improve your framing and composition.



Figure 1: Note how the edges of the frame are a bit loose.



Figure 2: A crop that would get rid of the negative space.



Figure 3: The final cropped image that feels more intimate.



Figure 4: An un-cropped photograph, slightly different from #3.

TRIANGLES IN 3 SUBJECTS

Another practical way you can compose using triangles is to photograph multiple-subjects (which include 3 subjects). When photographing three subjects, try to divide them in the frame to balance the image.

For this photograph, I saw the boy in the bottom-left of the frame, another man on the far right of the frame, and a painting of a man in the top of the frame. I worked the scene and tried to combine all of these three elements into a triangle composition to add balance and interest in the photo.



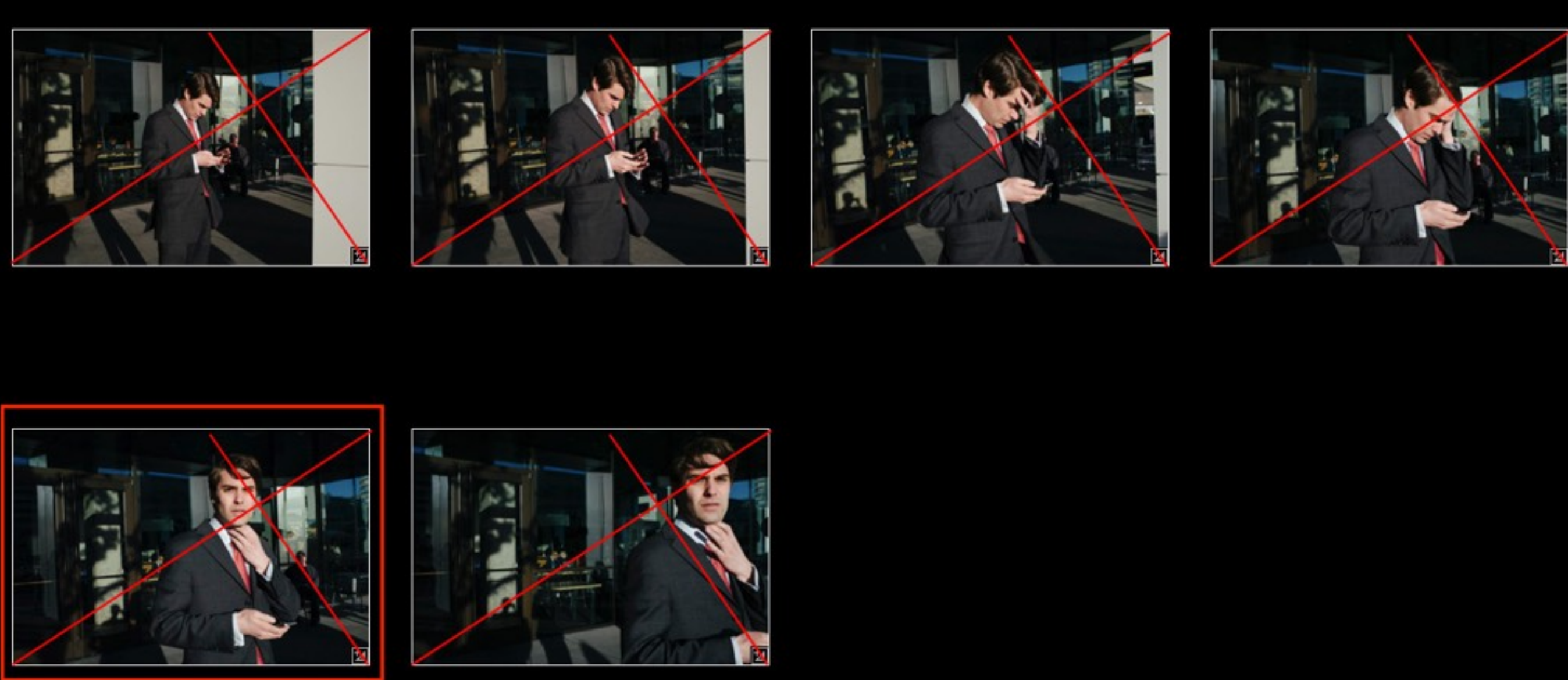
Mumbai, 2013



Contact Sheet: Mumbai, 2013

The contact sheet of the photograph which shows how I “worked the scene.” The first frame ended up being my best shot, but I had no idea (as I shot these on film). The second frame I took a step closer and framed the camera slightly higher. The third frame I took a slight step back. The fourth frame I took another step back. The fifth frame I took a step closer and crouched down a bit and saw a man walking into the frame. The sixth frame I framed it a little bit left to also include the man who is walking into the frame. The seventh frame I took a step very close and framed the boy’s head in the bottom of the frame, still trying to get a triangle in the composition. The last frame, he looked down and I clicked the shutter.

I ultimately chose the first image, as I preferred the triangular composition and balance of all the elements in the shot.



Contact Sheet: SF, 2015

For my “Suits” project, I saw this man texting on his phone in SF when the sun was setting and the light looked nice. I usually shot this entire project on my film Leica MP and 35mm lens, but I just ran out of film. I took my my digital Ricoh GR (28mm) and started to “work the scene.” I started off by taking a photograph by instinct, just in-case. I then took a step closer, and took another shot. In the third frame, I saw him stroking his hair, and took another shot. The shot after, I took a step closer (while I’m taking these shots, I’m intentionally trying to place his head in the top-right corner). By the fifth shot, he notices my presence, and looks straight at me (this is the shot). Then for the last frame, I took another step closer, and put him on the extreme right edge of the frame.

In the editing phase, I debated over frame 5 and frame 6. Ultimately I chose frame 5, because it fit the “golden triangle” composition better.



COMPOSITION & INTUITION

*“Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations, but **at the moment of shooting it can stem only from our intuition**, for we are out to capture the fugitive moment, and all the interrelationships involved are on the move.”*

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

The more you study composition and analyze your photos after-the-fact, the more you will begin to internalize composition as part of your intuition.

Street photography is one of the most difficult genres of photography, in which it is hard to simultaneously overcome the fear of photographing a stranger, while also composing strong images.

For me, I don't see red lines nor the “golden triangle” while I'm actually shooting. I see the subject, hand gestures, emotions, and the frame. However the practical way I try to apply the “golden triangle” is to not center my subject, but put them into the top-right quadrant of the frame.

Furthermore, by taking steps closer to my subject and moving around the framing of my camera, I try to follow my intuition and see which composition “feels” right.

I haven't been able to internalize composition overnight, but the more I study, the more I shoot, and the most I critique my own images, my intuition of composition becomes stronger.

“The photographer’s eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimeter. He can modify perspectives by a slight bending of the knees. By placing the camera closer to or farther from the subject, he draws a detail— and it can be subordinated, or he can be tyrannized by it.”

- Henri Cartier-Bresson



CHAPTER 4

FIGURE-TO-GROUND

FIGURE-TO-GROUND

One of the main functions of composition in photography is to let your viewer know what he/she should be looking at. Therefore the purpose of composition is to identify your main subject to your viewer.

The concept of “**figure-to-ground**” is that you want good separation and contrast between your figure (subject) from your ground (background).

For example, if you have a white or bright background, you want your subject to be dark (to pop out from the background). On the other hand, if you have a black or dark background, you want your subject to be bright.

We can start off illustrating the concept of “figure-to-ground” with the diagrams on the right.

In **Figure 1**, you see a black dot against a white background. It pops out really well, and there is clear separation from the figure (black dot) from the ground (white background).

In **Figure 2**, you can see it works the inverse way. The figure (white dot) has clear and strong contrast and separation from the ground (black background).

When there is clear separation of the subject from the background, we say the image has “**strong**” figure-to-ground.” If the separation isn’t clear, we say the image has “**poor**” figure-to-ground.

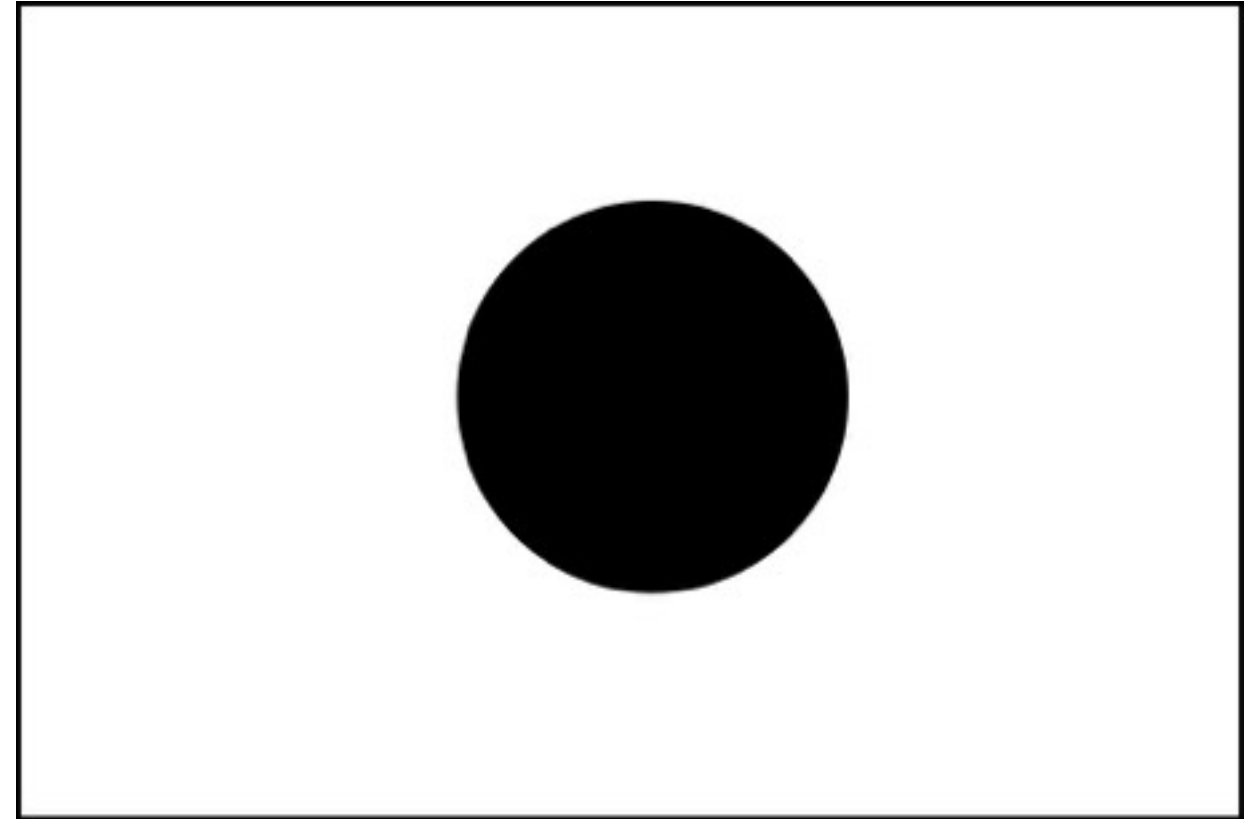


Figure 1: Black against white background. “*Strong*” figure-to-ground.

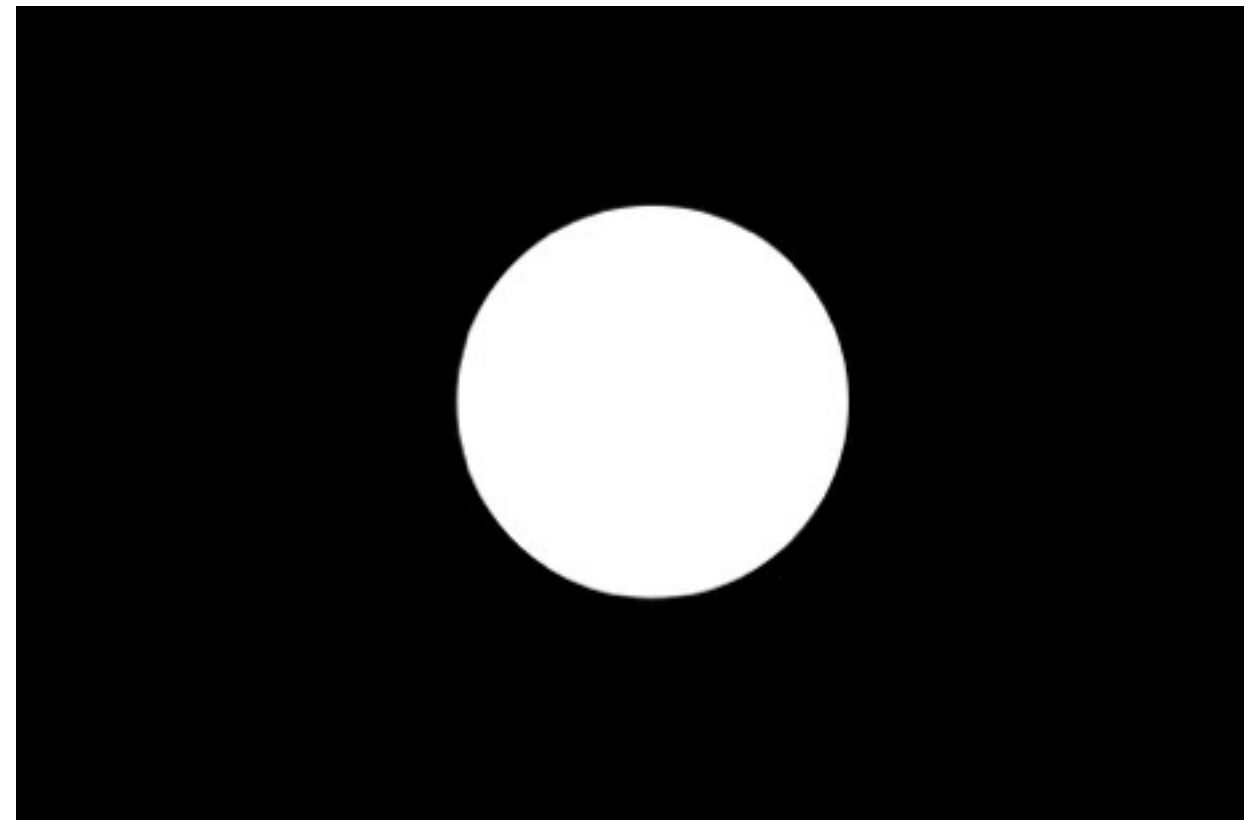


Figure 2: White against black background. “*Strong*” figure-to-ground.

Figure 3 and **Figure 4** are examples of “*poor*” figure-to-ground. Note how the dots and the backgrounds blend in together, and there isn’t strong contrast.

This is the mistake we often make in our photography. We don’t have clear separation between our subjects and the backgrounds. We often capture images with “poor” figure to ground by having overlapping figures, cluttered backgrounds, and not enough contrast in the scene.

What are some practical ways to make street photographs that have stronger figure-to-ground?

LOOK AT THE BACKGROUND FIRST

The common mistake a lot of street photographers make is that they first look at the subject, become so enamored with the subject, and therefore disregard the background. What ends up happening is that you have an interesting subject, with a messy or cluttered background with “poor” figure-to-ground.

So take the opposite approach: look at the background *before* photographing your subject.

What I try to do in my street photography is to look for clean and minimalist backgrounds. This allows me to put more emphasis and focus on my subjects.

For example, if I am shooting a “street portrait,” I ask for my subject to move to a simple background. They usually have no problem.

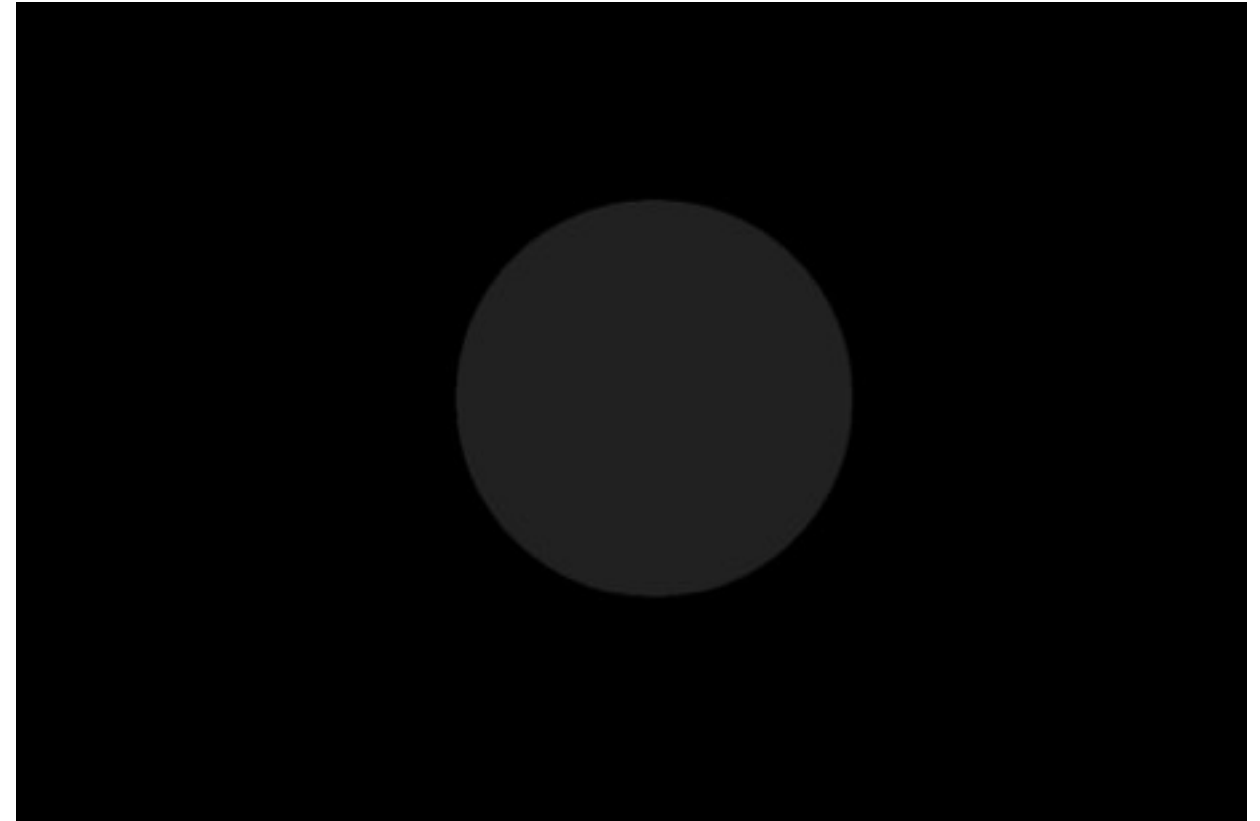


Figure 3: Dark-grey dot against black background. “*Poor*” figure to ground

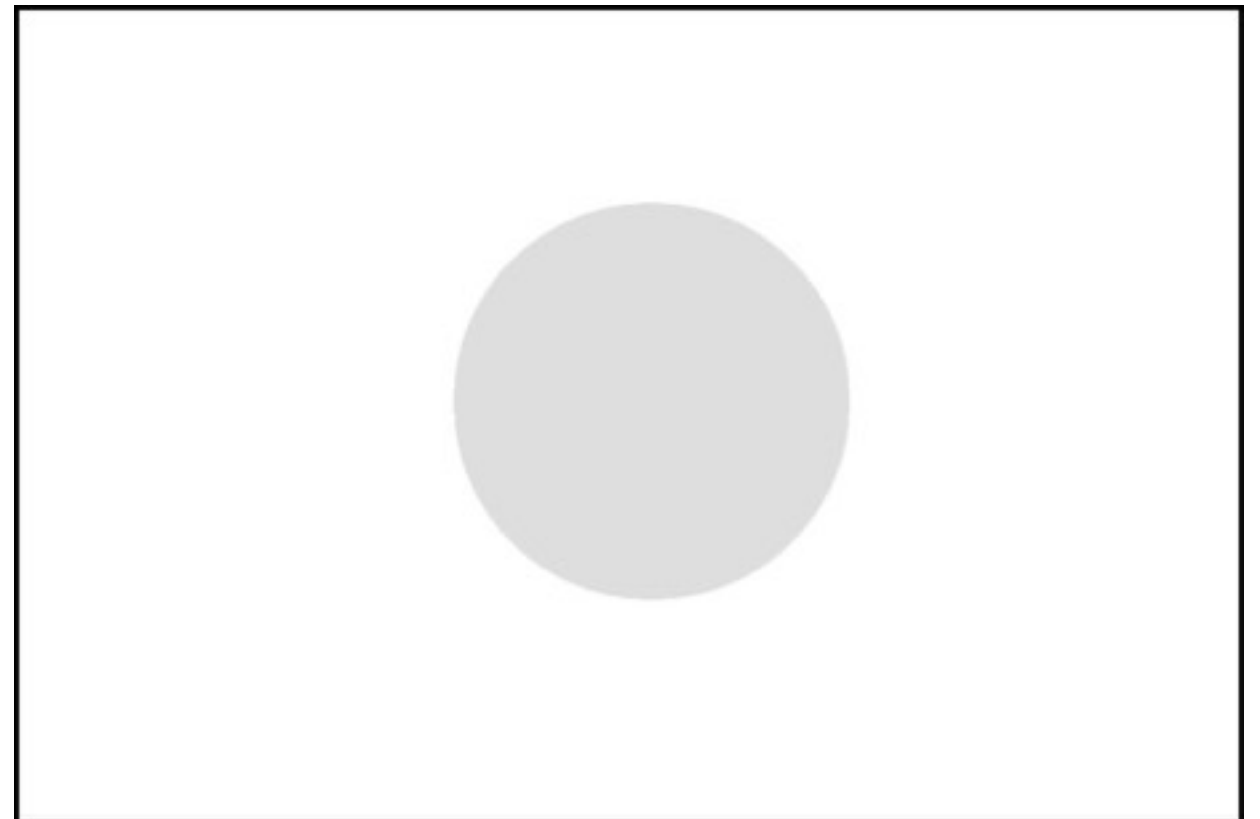


Figure 4: Light-grey dot against white background. “*Poor*” figure to ground



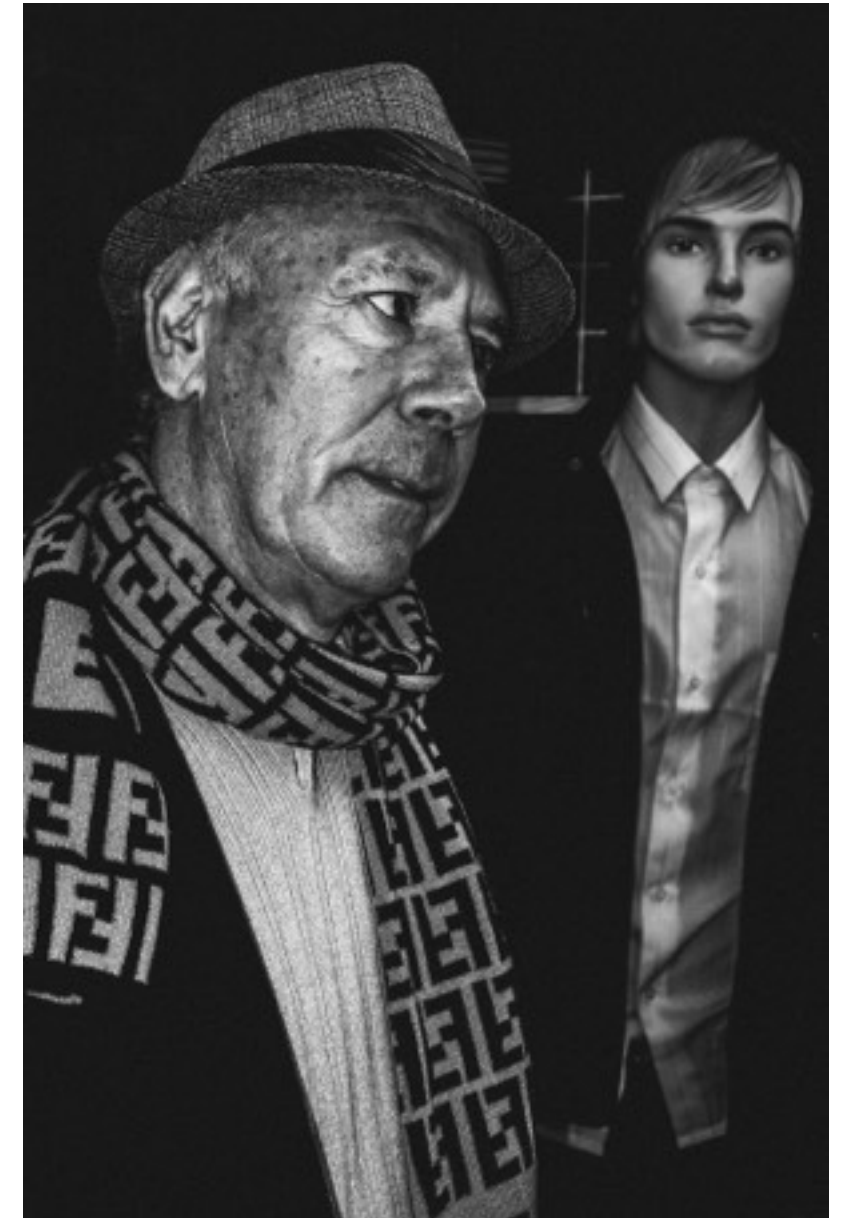
In this street portrait, I asked this woman to stand behind this white wall, which gives her clear separation from the background. Note that the edges in this shot are a bit cluttered (the black triangle in the bottom-left is a distraction).

When shooting street portraits, try to look at the **edges** of the frame when clicking.



In this image, there is *strong* figure-to-ground between the man's body and the white linked background. However the figure-to-ground is *poor* when it comes to his beard and his jacket (they blend in together). In addition, part of his head is blending too much into the top of the frame.

I ended up ultimately "ditching" this photo.



Another practical way to create strong figure-to-ground in street photography: **use a flash**. A flash will help your subjects pop out from the background, by lighting your subject and by darkening the background (assuming if you're shooting in the shade).

If new to flash, just try using it in "P" mode.

THE “FIGURE-TO-GROUND TEST”

One of the lessons that I learned from my friend Adam Marelli (one of the most knowledgeable photographers on composition) is the “figure-to-ground test.” The concept is if you blur an image and can still see the main subject and separation between and the background, it passes the test. Therefore it has “strong” figure-to-ground.



Take for example this photo I took in Tokyo, 2011. I loved the strong figure-to-ground between the dark subject and the white wall. I also intentionally burned (darkened) his face to make him seem more anonymous and mysterious.

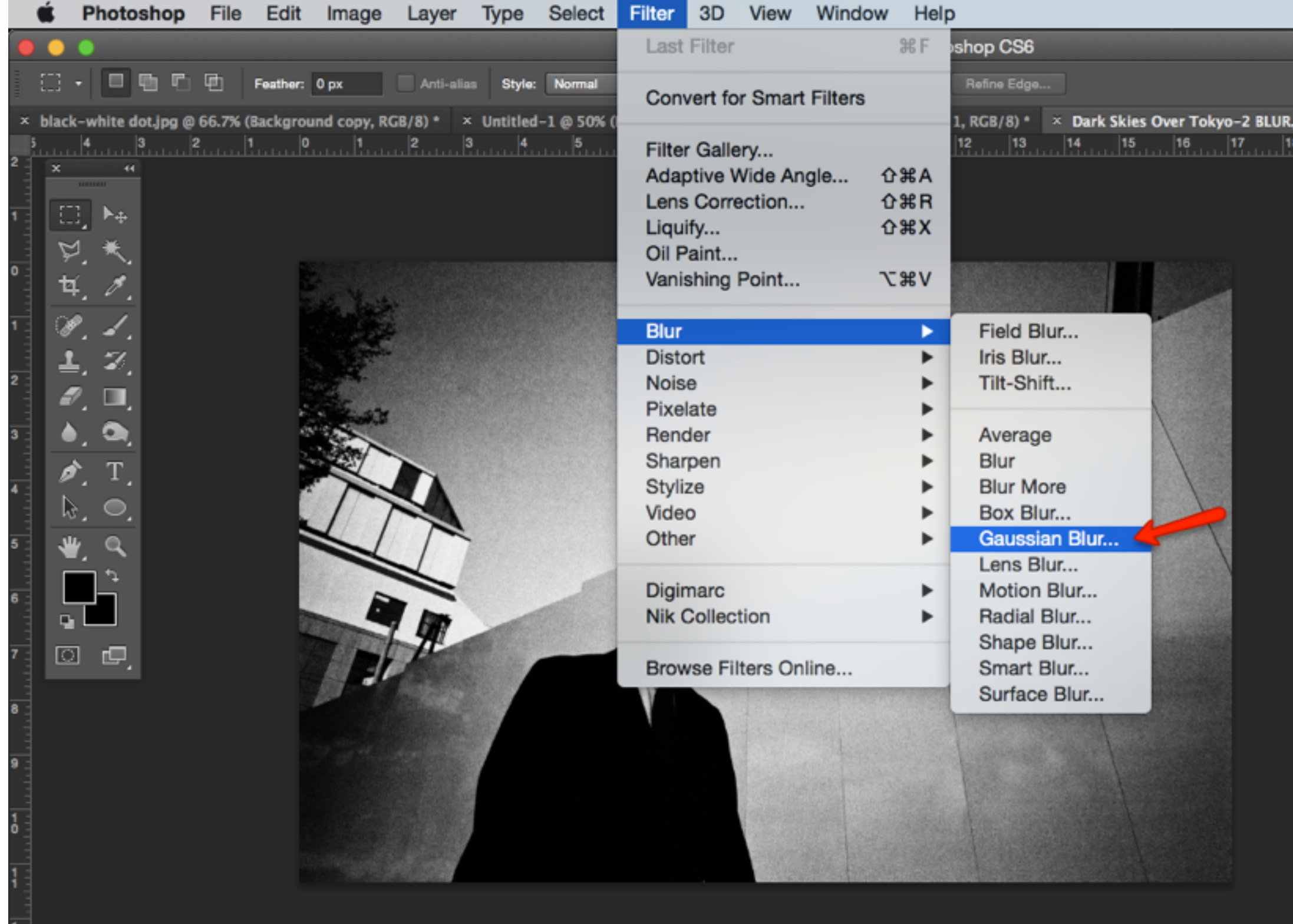
If I apply a “gaussian blur” in Photoshop, you can still clearly see the subject separated from the background. It passes our “figure-to-ground test.”



Even though the image is blurry, you can clearly see the subject.

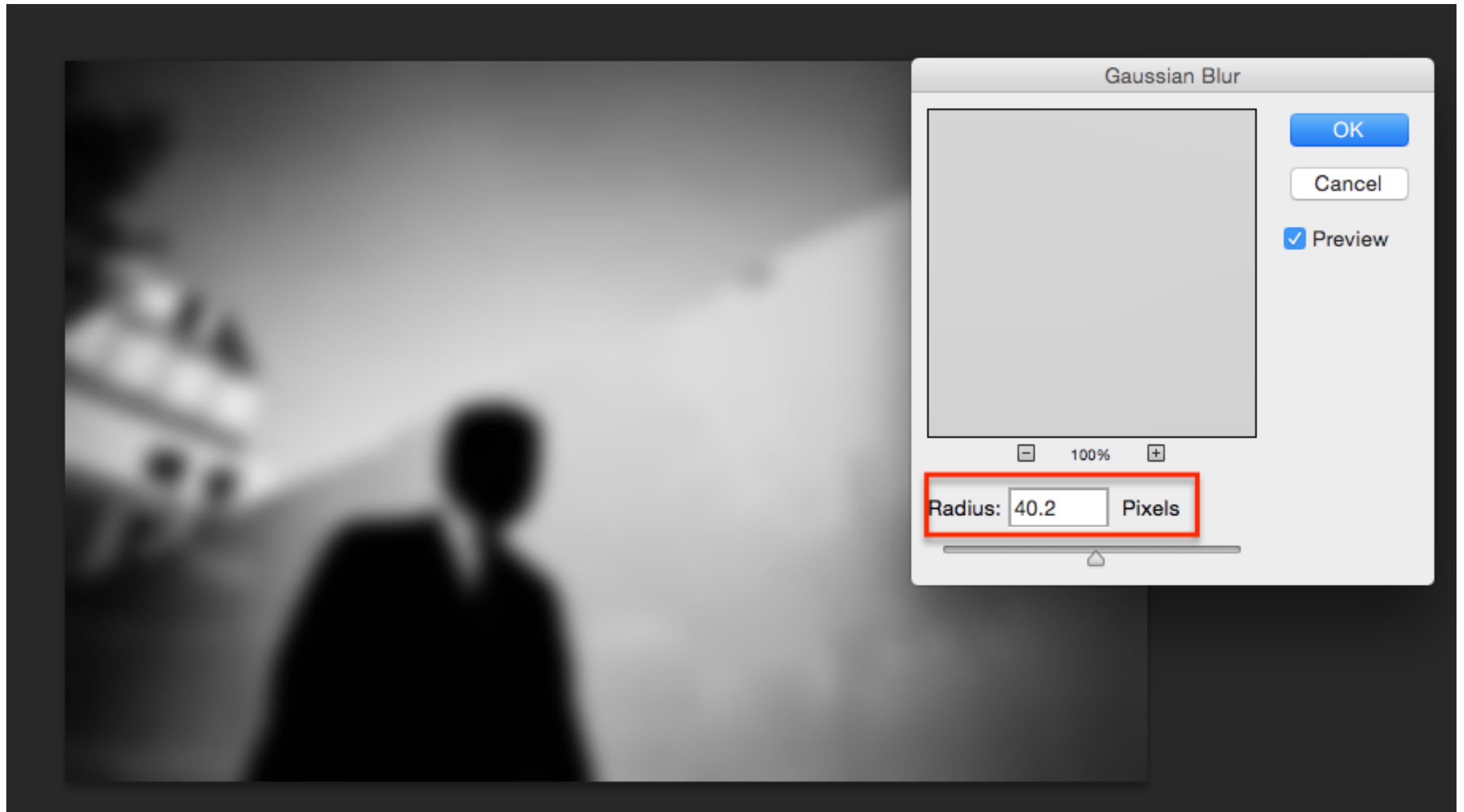


Here I have made it easier to see the outline of the subject in red.



HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN “FIGURE-TO-GROUND TEST”

To see if your images pass the “figure-to-ground test,” open up Photoshop, then go under “Filter” > “Blur” > “**Gaussian Blur**.” Depending on how big your image is, you need to adjust the blur. For this 4096px by 2725px image, I used 40px.



Even though your image might not pass the “figure-to-ground test,” it doesn’t necessarily mean it is a “bad” photograph. What it simply means is that it is hard for your subject to identify the subject in your photograph. Generally the stronger the figure-to-ground is, the clearer your image is to look at, and more visually appealing.

The best concept to keep in mind when trying to obtain strong figure-to-ground is **minimalism**. Less is more. Try to reduce clutter and noise.



EXAMPLE OF “POOR” FIGURE-TO-GROUND

I very much like this image that I also took in Tokyo. I love the intensity of all the men in suits drinking, smoking, and eating greasy food after a long and tough day at the office. To me the image feels uneasy, anxious, and full of pent up energy.

However when we apply a “gaussian blur” to the image for the “figure-to-ground test,” you can see that the image is quite cluttered. It is hard to separate the subjects in the top of the frame from the big white blob of food on the table in the middle of the frame.

Therefore this image has “poor” figure-to-ground, as it is difficult to see what is going on in the image.



I still personally like the image, even though it has poor figure-to-ground.

Ultimately when it comes to your street photography remember: you can still make photographs that touch you emotionally that have poor composition.

However if you decide to keep an image, openly acknowledge to yourself that the composition isn't great. But if you feel that the emotion and the content of the image is strong enough, sometimes having a weaker composition is okay.

At the end of the day, the strongest photographs are the ones that have **both strong emotions and a strong composition**. If I could choose one over the other? I believe that “**emotion is king**.”



DRAMATIC LIGHT AND FIGURE-TO-GROUND

Another way to establish strong figure-to-ground is to seek out **dramatic light**. With dramatic light, you are able to highlight a certain part of your image, which directs the viewer to focus on what you want them to look at.

For example in this photo on the left, I saw this sad and lonely businessman standing at the subway station, waiting for the train. I could feel his pain, sadness, and sorrow in his face. I was also lucky that I could see a streak of light perfectly highlighting his eyes.

I took a step close to him, and took around two frames vertically. He walked away, but I was lucky enough to get this shot in which the light directs your eyes to his sad and sorrowful eyes.

To capture dramatic light, try to shoot when the light is intense; preferably during golden hour (sunrise or sunset). This allows there to be dark shadows and vibrant light. As a rule-of-thumb, you know when the light is good when your shadows are taller than you.

If you're shooting during mid-day (afternoon) and the light isn't very good, you can also capture dramatic light by adjusting the exposure-compensation of your camera to **"-1"** or **"-2."** When shooting digital, I usually use "P" mode at ISO 1600, and focus more on the composition, light, and emotions of the image, and let the camera do the rest.

FLASH AND FIGURE-TO-GROUND

If you have a hard time separating your subjects from the background, I recommend trying to shoot street photography with a flash.

Why a flash? Shooting with a flash helps draw your subject out from the background, and separates them from the background. The flash creates a strong figure-to-ground.

Now you don't need to go out and shock or scare people with a flash. I recommend starting off by **asking for permission**.

For example, I saw this guy in Downtown LA and was drawn to his badass look. But at the same time, I was a bit nervous of the consequences if I just took an image without his permission.

Therefore I approached him and told him that I loved his tattoos and if I could make an image of him. He was actually very friendly, and said, "Sure, no problem." I took two photos with a flash at night.

You can see how the flash brightens his face, which creates a stronger figure-to-ground between him and the dark background. I also love the little lights in the background, which to me look like little butterflies or hearts.

When we blur the image, you can better see how the subject's face pops out from the background.





CHAPTER 5

JUXTAPOSITION

JUXTAPOSITION

One of the strongest compositional tools that street photographers use is “**juxtaposition**.” Simply put, “juxtaposition” is putting two subjects side-by-side that creates a strong contrasting effect.

Reality can be strange, and as street photographers, we try to seek these interesting scenes or moments in which we “juxtapose” subjects, objects, or scenes.

For example in this photograph, I saw this security officer standing outside next to this mannequin. At first the security officer was looking away, but I held up my camera and kept clicking, and waited for him to notice my presence. When he finally did notice me and looked at me, the direction his eyes were looking at me was very similar to the look of the mannequin.



In the photograph above (shot in Istanbul, 2013) I saw a man standing by the shore in an interesting suit. I worked the scene and took a lot of photographs of him. But I felt that something was missing. It wasn't until there was a boy in the background who prepared to jump into the water I saw an interesting juxtaposition.

Whenever I see another detail in a photograph which I like, I call it the “*cherry on top*.” For example, the boy jumping into the water in the far-right is the “cherry on top” for me. The photograph would be okay without the boy jumping into the water, but having him creates a more compelling image.

So when you're shooting on the streets, try to see what other elements, people, or subjects in the background you can add to create interesting juxtapositions in your scene. Some ideas: Old/young, fat/tall, black/white, red/green, light/dark, circles/rectangles, man/woman. What are some other juxtaposition ideas you can think of?



JUXTAPOSING EMOTIONS

In this photograph I shot in Istanbul, I love the juxtaposing emotions of the older woman in the bottom-left of the frame against the younger woman with blonde hair in the middle-right of the frame. To me, the shot shows the juxtaposition between old and new, traditional culture vs modern culture, and conservatism and liberalism. Juxtaposing elements amplify the emotions in this photograph.

JUXTAPOSING DIRECTIONS

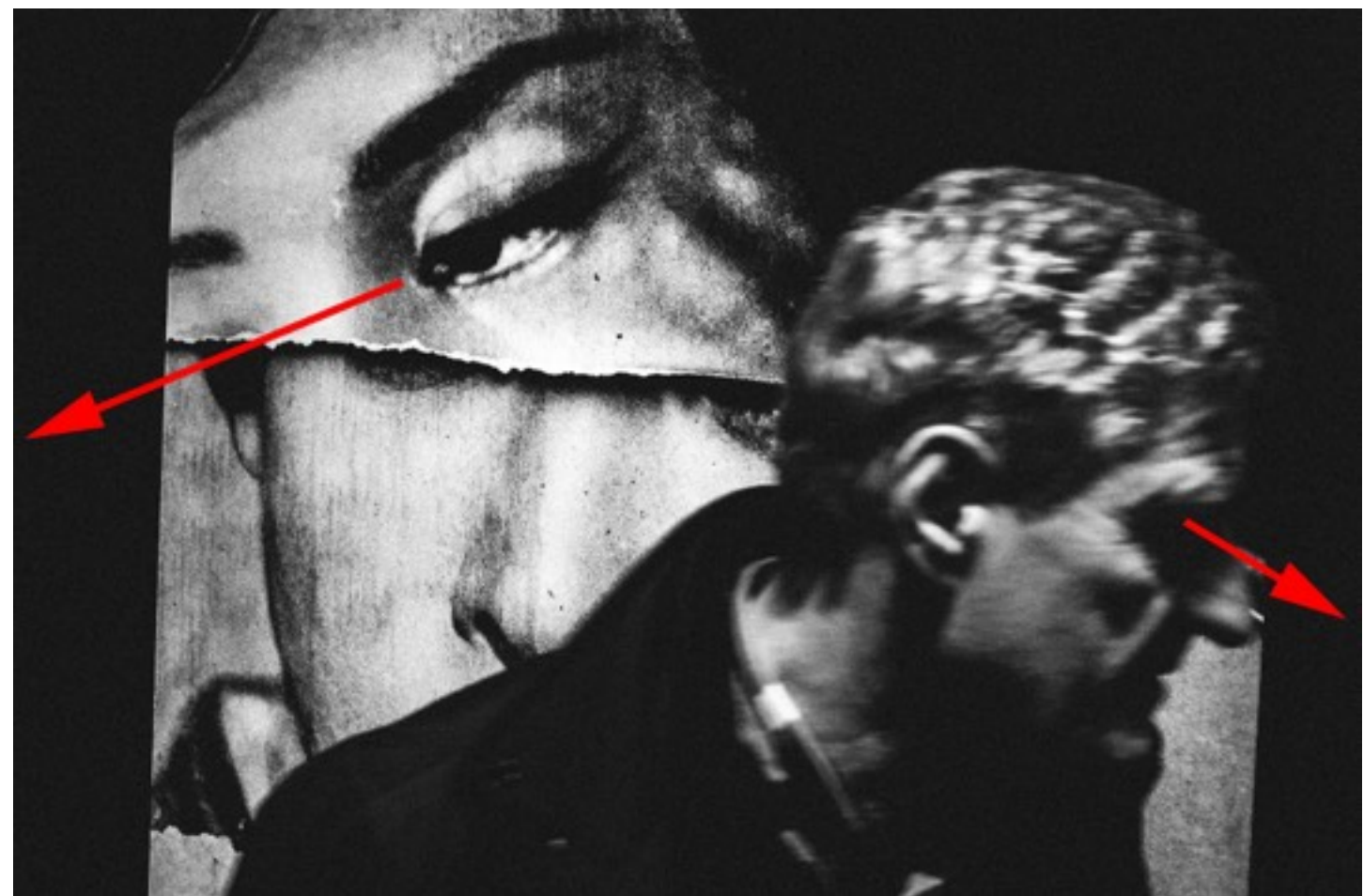
Another way you can integrate juxtaposition in street photos is by implementing “juxtaposing directions.”

For example in this photograph I shot in the right was at a William Klein exhibition in Amsterdam. I loved the eyes in the background that were pointing in the bottom-left of the frame. I then saw a man entering the scene, and took a few photographs of him facing the opposite direction (bottom-right of the frame).

Therefore the image has dynamic tension, between the directions of both faces.

There are many other ways you can create juxtaposing directions in street photography. If you have an image where a subject is pointing left, but you have a man walking in the opposite direction (right), this will create juxtaposing directions.

Or if you want, you can have different people in your image heading in the same direction. For example, if you had a poster with an arrow pointing to the right, you can be patient and wait for someone to follow in the same direction as the arrow.



SURREALIST JUXTAPOSITION

You can also integrate juxtaposition to your images by creating a sense of surrealism.

For example, I was at the World Press Photo Exhibition in 2011, and I saw the interesting juxtaposition between two infamous characters: the former North-Korean dictator (Kim Jung Il) and the editor-in-chief of Wikileaks (Julian Assange). I then suddenly saw that there were some people on the other side of the wall, looking at other photos!

I had seen such surrealist juxtaposition images on the internet before (photos looking like they had legs). So I was patient and waited until two people were standing perfectly under the the photographs.

I shot a ton of images, but I knew I didn't get the shot yet. However all of a sudden, the person on the left crossed their legs, and I clicked the shutter again. That is when I knew that I caught a more interesting gesture, as the crossed legs of the person on the left reflects the pensive



look of Kim Jung Il. When it comes to capturing surrealist juxtapositions of your own, I recommend looking at a lot of similar photos already taken in the past. Great examples of photographers who have mastered surrealist juxtapositions include many photographers from In-Public (Matt Stuart, Nils Jorgensen, Nick Turpin,

Richard Bram, Siegfried Hansen, Blake Andrews, David Gibson, Todd Gross, Jesse Marlow, Paul Russell, David Solomons, and the rest of the In-Public photographers. What about originality? Start off by imitating those whose work you admire, and try to add your own unique spin or twist on your street photography. Share your voice.



In this scene, we can see a juxtaposition of the people on top of the frame (having a good time), and the bored couple on the bottom of the frame. For this photo, I took one photo with a flash, and surprised this couple. They then stared at me in shock, and then I said: "Cool place, huh?" They then nodded their heads and said, "Yeah it is!" I then said "Enjoy your dinner!" and then moved on.



CHAPTER 6

COLOR THEORY

COLOR THEORY

I started off my street photography shooting digital black-and-white, but after around 5 years of working in that manner, I started to get bored. I wanted to experiment and try something new.

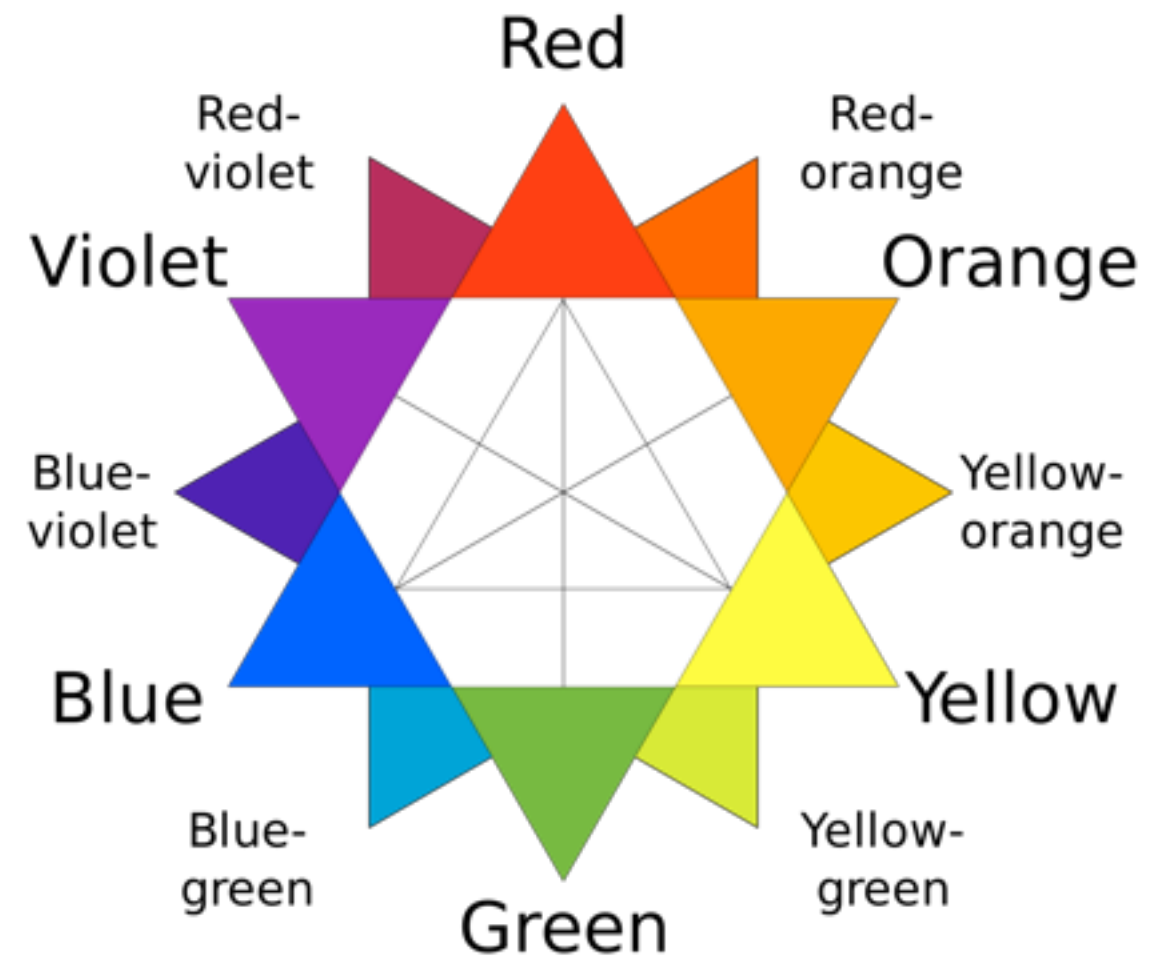
When I first discovered the amazing color street photography of Alex Webb, Martin Parr, William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Constantine Manos, and David Alan Harvey I was hooked. Once I started to focus on shooting only in color, I felt like my eyes were opened up to the rest of the world. There were so many opportunities, and I was excited.

However shooting color always presented a challenge for me. First of all, I knew nothing about “color theory” in street photography, and what really made a “good” color street photograph. I started my own self-directed studies in shooting color by looking at the greatest color street photography and experimenting myself.

For most of my color work, I focused on shooting film (Kodak Portra 400). I found that when intentionally shooting color, I was looking for colorful things. Not only that, but I was looking for certain hues, color palettes, and moods.

After experimenting shooting a lot of color street photography, then I started to study color theory. Why? I believe that practice should lead to theory, not theory leading to practice.

Also remember that they call it color “*theory*” for a reason. Theories come and go, but experience and results stay. If it works, it works.



COMPLEMENTARY COLORS

Pictured above is a “color star.” One of the theories in color theory is “complementary colors.” The concept is that colors opposite a “color wheel” (or pictured above, a “color star”) cancel each other out, therefore achieve harmony.

For example, red is complementary to green (think of Christmas and Heineken beer). Orange is complementary to blue (think of the New York Kicks or an orange sunset over a blue body of water). Yellow is complementary to violet (think of the Lakers or a violet water lily).

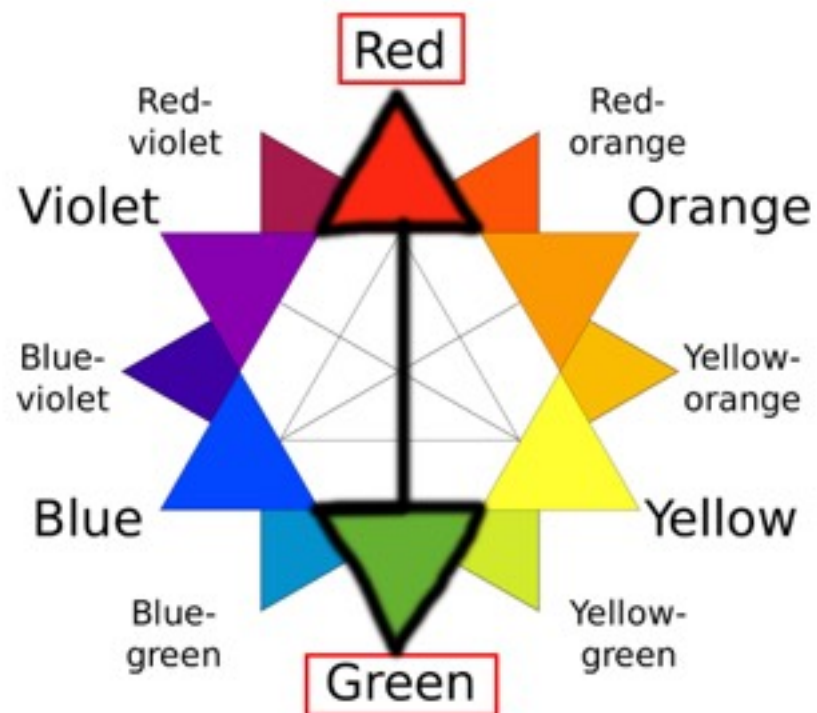
RED-GREEN COMPLEMENTARY COLORS

I was in the Mission district in San Francisco, and started to talk to this interesting gentleman who had this rough-and-tough looking Chihuahua. I first noted his black outfit and red outfits (like his 1% patch) as well as the red outfit for the dog.

Whenever I shoot street portraits, I try to ask my subjects to move to a simple background, and I lucked out that there was a green wall (which perfectly juxtaposes the red).

I ended up taking a bunch of photographs and preferred this image where both the man and the dog are looking straight at me.

Sometimes when you're shooting street photography in color, you will immediately see the complementary colors. Some other times, you will discover the complementary colors in the editing process. Either way, if the colors work, they work.

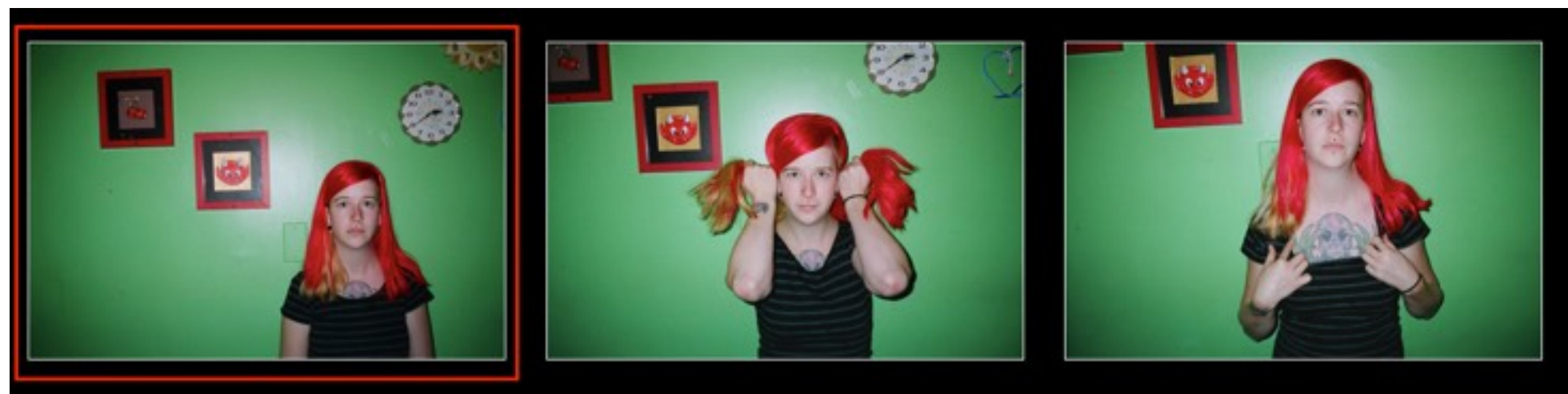


For another red-green complementary example, I was at a bar in Indianapolis and saw this waitress with some great red hair. At first I thought she would be unfriendly and wouldn't want to be photographed. But I thought to myself, "It never hurts to ask, and I will regret *not* asking to make her photograph."

Not only that, but I saw that the bar had great green walls, and little red picture frames on the walls. There was a little empty spot on one of the walls, and I thought that would be a perfect place to frame the waitress.

I then went up to the waitress and told her, "Excuse me miss, I absolutely love your red hair. I think you would look great contrasted against these green walls. Do you mind if I made a portrait of you standing right here?" She said no problem, and I directed her to stand at the spot I envisioned.

Afterwards, I asked her to have fun and grab her hair into pigtails (frame #2). For frame #3, I asked her to show me her skull tattoo. I still preferred shot #1 for the position.

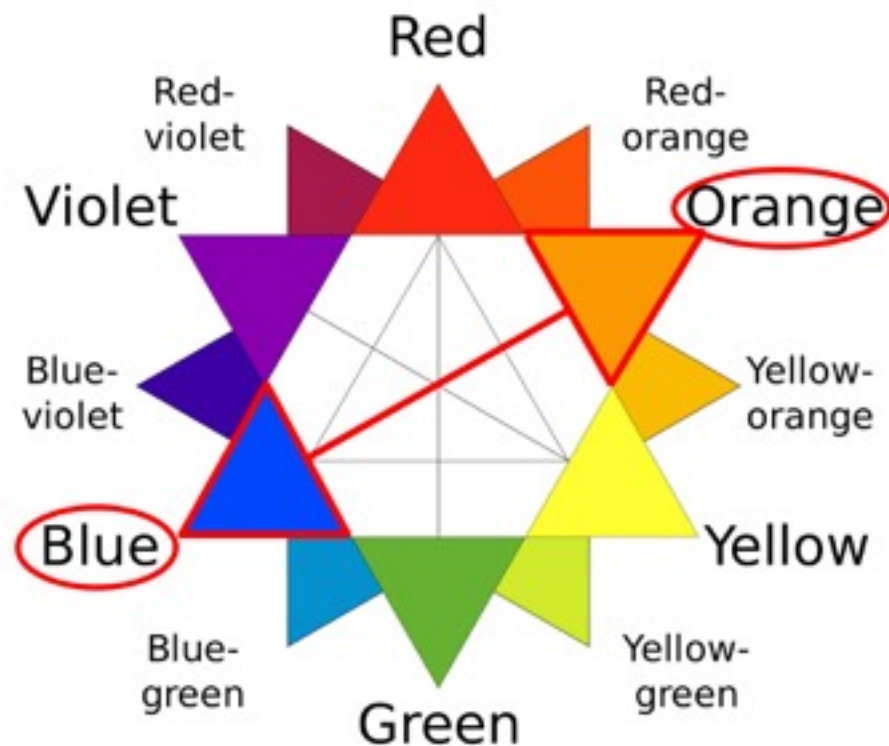


ORANGE-BLUE COMPLEMENTARY COLORS

For this street photograph, I saw an interesting character in San Francisco and asked for permission to photograph him. He said no problem, so I “worked the scene” and ended up taking a total of 64 photos.

In terms of the colors, I loved the juxtaposition between his orange skin tones (and his orange SF hat) and the blue tones in the background. Furthermore, you can see a poster of a woman in the background who also has orange skin tones, and a orange top.

You can also see when I add a “gaussian blur” in Photoshop, you can better see the complementary colors in the scene. I didn’t see the complementary colors while shooting the scene, but I discovered it afterwards, that is why I decided to keep the shot. I also loved the emotion of his face.





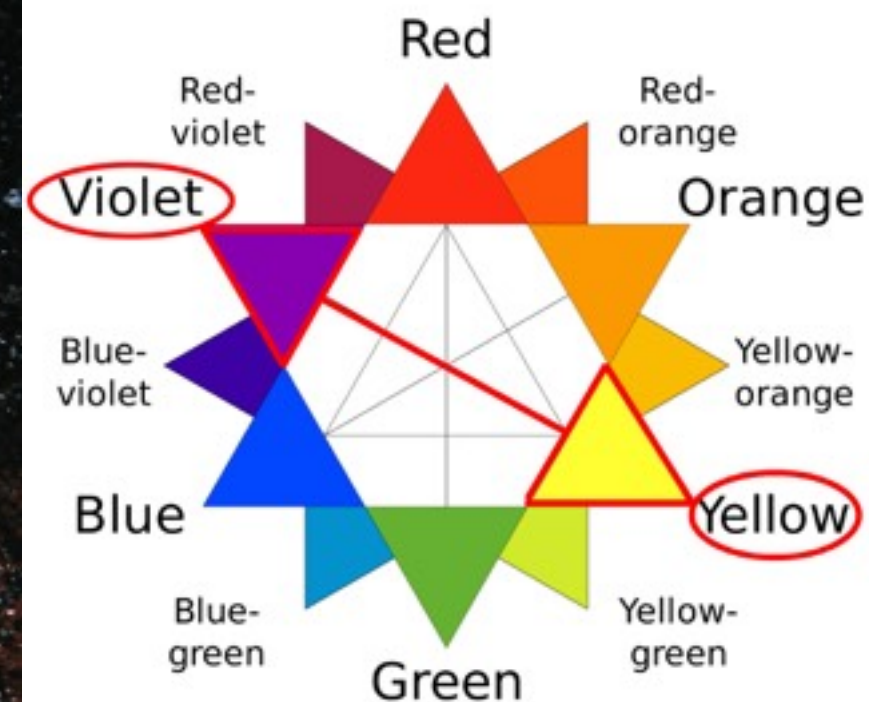
Contact Sheet: SF, 2015

If you examine this contact sheet, you can see how I “worked the scene.” I started off photographing my subject against a dark background, with dramatic light (with my exposure compensation set to -2). After taking around 18 photos of him, I saw an interesting advertisement of a woman in the background.

I then asked my subject to move against the interesting background, and I started to take a lot of photographs trying to juxtapose him and the advertisement. I also ended up taking some photos with flash and without flash. Furthermore you can also see all of the photos I took at the end that just focused on his hands.

One of the practical tips I have when it comes to photographing “street portraits” (or photos with permission) is to **focus on the background**. Sometimes when we see an interesting character, we get so carried away and totally disregard the background (and only focus on the subject).

Try to take the opposite approach. Next time you’re shooting street photography (with or without permission), focus first on the background, and then worry about the subject afterwards. This allows you to look and discover juxtaposing elements between the background and the subject.



VIOLET-YELLOW COMPLEMENTARY COLORS

When you think of violet and yellow, what are some of the first colors that come to mind? Perhaps the violet robes of Roman emperors and gold. Perhaps the LA Lakers colors, or even violet flowers with yellow stamens.

Violet and yellow color combinations are tough to find, but if you focus on shooting color, you will find them.

For example, I saw this broken umbrella with a vibrant violet color

and the simple yellow diagonal line. I took a photograph with a flash which really saturated the colors.

It isn't the most interesting photograph in the world, but not all of your photos have to be. When I'm shooting in color, I am specifically looking for interesting color combinations. Color becomes your subject matter.

Just because it isn't a photograph of a human being doesn't mean you can't photograph it. Try experimenting photographing commonly found objects, and see how you can complement the colors.

WARM VS COOL COLORS

Another idea in color theory is “**warm vs cool colors.**”

Warm colors are generally associated with hues which include **red**, **orange**, **yellow**, **brown**, and **tan**.

Cool colors are generally associated with hues which include **blue**, **green**, **violet**, and most **grays**.

What is an easy way to remember the difference between warm and cool colors? For warm colors, imagine daylight, sunsets, and the warmth of the sun. For cool colors, imagine the water, cold weather, and overcast days.

Warm and cool colors generally evoke different emotions as well. Warm colors evoke energy, vigor, life, passion, anger, danger, anxiety, and action. Cool colors evoke calm, peace, relaxing, chill, and meditative moods.

This is the psychology of color. Colors aren't just colors for the sake of it, they evoke different moods in your viewer.

For example, a photograph with predominately warm colors will make your viewer feel more alert and active than a photograph with predominately cool colors which will relax and calm your viewer.

You can make images which are predominately all warm colors or all cool colors. Or you can make images which are predominately warm colors (with a splash of cool color) or vice-versa, an image with predominately cool colors (with a splash of warm color).

Generally when I am shooting street photography in color, I try to think in terms of warm vs cool tones. I think seeing warm vs cool



colors is far easier theoretically than complementary colors.

My favorite color in street photography is red, as I love the energy, passion, and fire of it. Red pops out from the page. But whenever I see the color red (or any other warm color), I try to find a background with cool colors which juxtaposes it.

Human skin tones are predominately warm. So if shooting color, try to get your subjects to stand against cool backgrounds. Also having images that juxtapose warm vs cool colors is also a good way to create separation and contrast (figure-to-ground).



WARM COLORS

For this image, I was in line at a greek restaurant, about to order a gyro. From the corner of my eye, I saw this amazing woman with her red hair and yellow outfit. I was immediately drawn to her outfit and warm colors. I approached her, and told her that her outfit was incredible. I asked if I could make her portrait, and she said “I don’t know why you asians love to take my photograph!”



CONTACT SHEET: TUCSON, 2013

When I asked this woman to take her photograph, she first asked me, “What do you want me to do?” I told her: “Show me your wonderful fingernails!” and I took an image with a flash (which further saturates the colors and separates her from the background). I took another shot. The third photograph she asked, “How does my lipstick look?” and I clicked (which was my favorite shot). The next two photographs I shot without a flash (because I was curious how it would turn out. The last shot she held her fingernails up again, and I took another image. When you are shooting color, I recommend trying to

use a flash whenever possible. Why? As you can see in this contact sheet, the difference between the flash and photos without a flash is quite dramatic. The photos without a flash are drab, and the colors don’t pop out as much. Of course, if you have really amazing window light (or if you are shooting at golden hour), natural light looks better.

Also what I noticed after I took this image is the nice little touch of green in the bottom-left of the frame, which I think adds to the color palette of the image. Sometimes the street photography gods bless you with small details which you could have never expected.



This is another of my favorite street portraits which have predominately warm colors (the red of his jacket, the yellow of his shirt, his yellow/orange sunglasses, the orange of the seats in the background, and the little hint of blue on the top of the frame).

It isn't everyday you see a "red cowboy." I saw him at a Starbucks in LA, and I was first nervous to approach him. But I knew I would deeply regret not approaching him and asking to make his portrait. So I mustered up the courage, chatted with him for around 30 minutes (he told me he invented the internet), and at the end I asked if I could make a few photos of him. He asked me: "What do you want me to do?" I said, "I don't know, maybe try to fix your tie?" The first shot came out best.

COOL COLORS

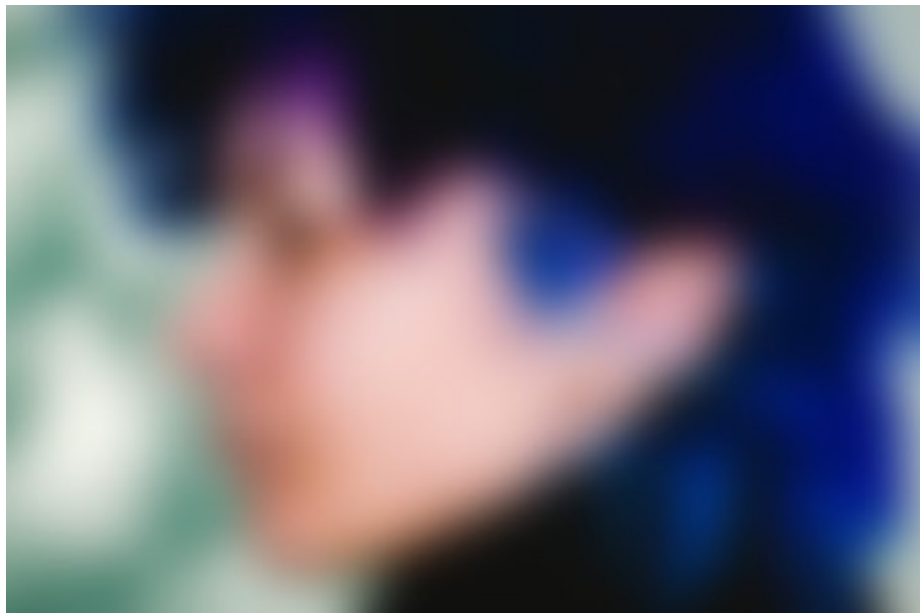
Another day I was in the Mission in San Francisco, and saw this woman with some great blue hair during a workshop I was teaching. I shot this photograph on my Ricoh GR, and used the macro mode and got very close with the 28mm lens and used a flash.

I took a lot of different photos with different orientations (horizontal and verticals), but found the horizontal shot to be the best compositionally speaking.

Upon examination after taking the photograph, I found that it followed the “golden triangle” grid quite well. I like how her eye is positioned in the top-left of the frame, and how her pierced ear is positioned well in the bottom-right of the frame.

Furthermore, I like the cool and relaxed tones of this image (her blue-violet hair and the faint green background) contrasted against her warm face.

If you blur the image, you can also see how the center of the frame is mostly warm, while the edges are cool colors.



COOL COLORS WITH A SPLASH OF WARM

In this photograph below, I was in Downtown LA and saw this wonderful mural of the galaxy which is predominately cool colors (the blue). I then saw an interesting scene: the galaxy had a “backdoor entrance” which was held open with an orange safety cone.

I loved the strange surrealism of the scene, and made a photograph. Note that if the cone was a cool color, there wouldn't be enough separation and contrast between it and the background. Because the cone is a bright orange, you can still see it against the blue.

So if you are photographing a scene with a predominately cool background, look around and see if there is anything warm you can add into the scene.

Another example: if you find an interesting blue background, wait and use the “fishing technique” for someone wearing a red (or warm-colored shirt) to enter the scene. This will help pop them out from the background, and add a strong “figure-to-ground” in terms of the warm vs cool colors.

When shooting colors, try to keep in your mind “warm vs cool.”

“IS IT STREET PHOTOGRAPHY?”

Looking at this photo on the right, one might ask: “Is this street photography?” For me, I would define “street photography” as documentary humanity, life, and moments in-between.

So is the shot on the right “street photography”? Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn't. Over the years I have begun to care less about definitions, but regardless, I find the shot interesting. Perhaps I can call it “*still life street photography*” and invent a new genre to pursue. For more similar imagery, study the work of William Eggleston.





CHAPTER 7

STORYTELLING



STORYTELLING

Everyone loves a good story. I find that the best street photos are the ones that suggest interesting stories to the viewers.

When we are looking at photographs, our minds try to make sense of the images by creating a narrative. Therefore when there is incomplete information in a photograph, our minds try to create a story. Our minds try to fill in the gaps. This challenges and engages our mind, which makes these photographs much more interesting to look at.

OPEN VS CLOSED PHOTOS

There are two main types of photos when it comes to storytelling: “open” and “closed” photos. “**Open**” photos are open-ended, and allows the viewer to make up his/her own story or interpretation of a scene. “**Closed**” photos are closed to interpretation, meaning there is only one way to interpret a photograph.

“Open” photos tend to be much more interesting than “closed” photos, as each viewer can interpret the photo however he/she would like. Not only that, but when you look at a photograph at different points of your life, you might interpret it differently. As human beings, we use our own life experiences, opinions, prejudices, philosophies, culture, and concepts when looking and interpreting photographs. That is why someone from the west can interpret the same photograph differently from someone from the east.

In this photograph on the left I shot in Paris (2010), I like the open-ended feel. What are these girls looking at, and what is the story? The outstretched arm of the girl is the “cherry on top.”

OPEN-ENDED EMOTION

One of the best ways to make a strong street photograph is to capture strong emotion combined with an open-ended nature. For example, I saw this man in London dining alone at a restaurant. I saw him with his two fingers pressed against his temple, and looking aimlessly into a french fry he was eating. When I saw this scene, I was able to empathize with him emotionally; I could feel his loneliness, despair, sadness, and sense of being lost. What I feel contributes most to the emotions in this photograph is the two fingers pressed

against his forehead. So if you see similar street scenes, try to create open-ended emotions with hand-gestures, body-gestures, or the look in someone's face.

The more you can empathize with your subjects emotionally, the more open-ended you can make your photographs, and the more engaged you can make your viewer.

A great street photograph needs a strong composition and strong emotion. Even if you have a street photograph that is perfectly composed, without strong emotion the image is dead.

EYE CONTACT?

Sometimes street photos with eye contact work better, sometimes not having eye contact works better. When you're shooting, it is hard to tell which is going to be better. My suggestion: try to get both.

For the image on the right I took two photos; one with him looking at his french fry, and one of him looking straight at me. I preferred the one of him not looking at me, because I can see him "lost in thought."



CLOSED PHOTOS

Closed photographs aren't necessarily "bad" nor "worse" than open photos. They're just different.

For example this urban landscape I shot in Detroit is a "closed" photo in the case that there isn't that many ways to interpret the photograph. It is what it is; signage for loans, pawnbrokers, and gold. There are many different colors in the frame which move your eyes around, and the sign "Michigan" which gives you a sense of place.

For me, the shot still evokes an emotion out of me (even though it is a "closed" photograph). I feel a sense of loss-- the loss of Detroit's once-prosperous past, gone into ruin.

Therefore with "closed" photographs, you force your own interpretation of the scene onto your viewer. You want to make it very clear what you want to say to the viewer, without an open-ended way to interpret the image.



At the end of the day, I still prefer "open" images in the sense that they allow the viewer to be much more engaged with an image, which forces them to come up with their own interpretation. I think it would be boring if authors or movie directors always "explained" their works of art to the viewer. When the viewer has power, the work takes on a life of its own.

It is difficult to know whether your shot will be an "open" or "closed" photograph while you're shooting on the streets.

My suggestion: **follow your guts and instincts when shooting on the streets**, and figure out what kind of meaning the photograph is going to have *after* you've taken it.

STORYTELLING WITHOUT PEOPLE?

In the past, I always felt that if an image didn't have a person on it, that it was somehow lacking or incomplete.

Realize that you can create powerful images which can tell a moving story without having people in it.

For example, I took this photograph in East Lansing in Michigan of a job application Kiosk inside a supermarket. When I took this image in 2013, the economy in Michigan was still relatively weak, and I remember hearing in the news politicians complaining how the poor were just being “lazy” and not getting jobs.

However with this photograph, I tried to create a story or narrative through this juxtaposition: an on-line employment application machine which was out of order. How can people apply for jobs without a working machine?



CAN YOU CREATE A TRULY “OBJECTIVE” PHOTOGRAPH?

There is no truly “objective” photos when it comes to photography. Every image you create is highly subjective. You identify scenes based on your personal history, your political viewpoints, as well as your life experiences. For example, you can probably see my liberal political leaning through this image, as I generally relate and sympathize with working-class and poor people (I grew up relatively socio-economically disadvantaged). Don't feel obliged to make “objective” photos. Make them subjective, and share your perspective and viewpoint with the rest of the world. The more personal and subjective you make your photos, the stronger your images, and the more memorable they will be.



CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

EMOTIONS ARE KING

To conclude this book, I want to meditate on the importance of composition and emotion, and ultimately what matters the most in photography.

When I started my journey in photography, I was obsessed with composition. There was nothing that excited me more than nice framing, leading lines, figure-to-ground, juxtapositions, and light. Any image that I made that made an homage to Henri Cartier-Bresson (in terms of geometry and composition) was a home-run in my book.

However at the point of writing this book, I have realized that composition isn't the end-all in photography. For me, **composition is only a tool that should be used in photography to highlight emotion and the human condition.** Composition for composition's sake means nothing to me.

Of course there are some images you're going to make that look purely beautiful because of the aesthetic and composition of the image. That is fine, but I think that as street photographers, we should be hunting less for composition, and more for emotion in our images. That is what sticks.



At the end of the day, even though a street photograph has a lousy composition, as long as it has strong emotion, it can still work. In fact, I feel that **emotion trumps composition.** I would rather take a street photograph with strong emotion (and a weak composition) over a street photograph with a strong composition (and weak emotions).

Ideally, you want to have an image with both a strong composition *and* strong emotion.

Never forget to **shoot from the heart.** Use your love, empathy, and concern with humanity be the guiding principle in your street photography. But at the same time, try diligently to compose your photos to highlight the emotions in your images (to the best of your ability).

Never forget how difficult and elusive street photography is. **If you can make 1 good street photo a month, you are doing well.**



BREAK THE RULES

Ultimately there are no “rules” in photography. There are merely “suggestions” and “guidelines.” However when you are starting off, it is helpful to have a solid foundation to build your photography upon. But once you learn the rules, break them.

Rules can sometimes be helpful. Having “**creative constraints**” can force an artist to think “outside the box” and come up with unique solutions to his/her problems. However once you find rules and restrictions to constrict your creativity, break out of those shackles, and just follow what interests you. Disregard the criticism of others, and follow your own path in photography.

GIVE BACK

No person is his or her own island. I am thankful to Adam Marelli for teaching me many of the fundamentals to composition and photography, as well as all of the other photographic tutors, guides, teachers, colleagues, and friends along the way.

One of the parting words I want to share with you is to give back. Give back to the rest of the photographic community by sharing your own opinions, thoughts, and constructive critiques with other photographers.

If you see a street photographer who posts photos (and doesn't get any feedback), step out of your comfort zone and give them a constructive critique in terms of what they could do to improve their composition (and emotion) in their photos. Don't do this in a negative or critical way, but in a loving and mindful way (in order to help them improve their photography).

Also everything in this book is “*open source*,” meaning that you are free to edit, change, remix, and share



any of the contents this book with anybody you wish. The reason I wrote this book is to help empower street photographers starting off, or wanting some guidance and new ideas. I am certainly not an expert when it comes to composition nor am I the best street photographer, and I am still a student and learning. But my passion and heart is in sharing everything that I have learned along my journey in photography.

HELP SUPPORT FUTURE BOOKS

If you found this book helpful and want to help support me to continue making more open-source books on street photography, you can show your gratitude by sending me a donation to me via PayPal to: “erickimphotography@gmail.com”. The money will go towards espressos and other caffeinated beverages to help me keep going!



ABOUT ERIC KIM

Eric Kim is an international street photographer and educator currently based in Berkeley, California. His passion is to share information and knowledge via an “*open-source*” approach to help empower other photographers from all around the world. He also actively travels and teaches street photography workshops internationally in order to help his students build courage and build a sense of community.

Eric writes articles, books, and essays that combine his interests in street photography, philosophy, and sociology. He also shares his approach and lectures in street photography through his YouTube videos.

You can connect with Eric below:

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Portrait by Josh White, 2014